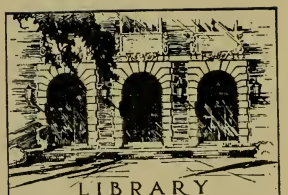

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Children's Children

SECOND VOLUME

CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

A STORY OF TWO GENERATIONS

BY

ALAN MUIR

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1879

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CHILDREN'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

CRABBED AGE AND YOUTH.

The time was early June. The leaves of the trees had not yet lost the delightful freshness of spring, and, cleansed by a fall of rain, they displayed every shade of green, from the sombre ivy to the light tint of the young hazel. In a little valley, formed by the junction of two low hills, and thus open at one end, and at the other enclosed by a steep grassy slope—a coombe, as such valleys are called in provincial speech—the sun, air, earth, and

sky had collected a multitude of charms in a small space; and, as even the most beautiful place has some particularly charming spot—beauty within beauty, like the sparkle in a diamond—so this coombe had one small wooded field, of which Nature had made a pet. Here a young woman was walking, enjoying the scenery and the solitude. A little rivulet, whose springs lay not many yards above in the hillside fields, sang on its downward way, spreading itself out in one place into a broad shallow stream, and then growing narrow, and diving deep into the ground, where it was hidden by the tufts of grass, which laced their long blades into each other across the tiny chasm between which the water flowed. Whether the hedge sought the society of the brook, or the brook thought it more snug to be under the shadow of the hedge, would be hard to say, but they were generally close

together, and went zig-zag down the field side by side. All was silent, except the tongue of that little chattering brook, and the girl found in it a companion to her own thoughts, which were pleased and tranquil, as thoughts should be when all the world is smiling. She rambled on, and sometimes her face was turned downward to the flowery grass over which she walked, and sometimes upward to the fresh clear sky.

The sun, which within the compass of those few acres shone upon many an object that was pleasant to the eye, saw nothing there so fair as this young woman. She was in the bloom of youth, and her face and form were finely moulded; and yet her features, in spite of their remarkable delicacy, had a ripeness and fulness which marked capacity for warm and deep feeling. She was dressed with great simplicity in a plain grey gown,

and a blue ribbon carelessly tied and flowing over her shoulder was all the ornament she wore; and she swung her hat at her side, not the least afraid, it seemed, of the sun spoiling her complexion. In her hand she carried a book in a black cover, and with particular red edges, which at that period were associated almost inseparably with students' manuals. She had been reading the 'History of Rome,' and one finger between the leaves marked the place where her studies had broken off; for her thoughts had skimmed away from the dry page, and were running along with the music of the brook, or playing at hide and seek among the waving foliage. As she strolled along she saw, among a little clump of trees, an oak whose spreading roots offered a dry and shady resting-place to the passer-by, and here she seated herself, and, letting the book slip out of her hand, gave herself

up to such light reverie as the scene and her own mood easily engendered.

The wind, which had been blowing pleasantly, sank to rest, and the warm air invited the girl to sleep. All was profoundly still, and an occasional fragment of bird song, breaking from the secrecy of the trees and dying away as suddenly as it rose, made the silence more palpable. The girl, like a child of Nature, rested her head upon her arm, and, closing her eyes, forgot herself and the scene around her. As she lay there sleeping, her face somewhat changed its expression, the fine mouth and nostrils becoming sterner and more determined. She looked a delicate bit of workmanship, and her chiselled features and white skin contrasted curiously with her homely attire. The boot, too, that peeped from underneath her dress was an old and shabby one, while the foot it covered was

small and well-shaped. Her hair was brown, shading into auburn, and altogether there was in her appearance a mingled refinement and homeliness which were not easy to reconcile.

She lay thus sleeping for a few minutes and then awoke, with a particular sense of having been aroused by some unusual noise. It was not a louder murmur from the brook, nor any bird more musical than his comrades which had startled her, that she knew; but now, as she lay drowsily listening, she heard for a time nothing uncommon. At last the sound of a human voice close by caught her ears; a voice low, but remarkably penetrating, and full of emotion; and it was repeating some words, the articulate sound of which did not reach her. Was some one speaking into her ear? She turned round; and, when she saw from whom the sounds came, she remained in the

same attitude, leaning upon one hand, fixed by surprise and curiosity.

A few paces off stood a little woman of most singular appearance. She was bowed down by deformity so that her chin almost rested on her breast; her face was crooked half outward and half upward, nor did any part of her head rise higher than her shoulders. Her dress was quaint and old-fashioned, but of the richest sort, and her skirts were looped up with great care and regularity. The young girl, observing this apparition more closely, saw that the old woman's hair was whiter than snow, and that her features were large and ungainly: her face was working almost convulsively, and she still muttered inaudible words.

And now the young girl perceived that the stranger's gaze was fixed on an object which was carefully placed against the trunk

of a tree. This was a large wooden shrine, such as Roman Catholics use for their crucifixes and madonnas, only of unusual size and made of finely polished wood. Within the shrine was a picture, but the light so fell upon it that the girl could not make out what it represented. She fancied that she discerned a table and a book, but dismissed that idea as improbable, for it was evident from what followed that the shrine contained some sacred object. The old woman, whose hands were clasped upon her breast, regarded the picture with a look of adoration: to it she spoke, and her accents were those of worship or of prayer. The whole was plainly some religious act, and the young girl had no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that the stranger was a Roman Catholic performing some private devotion. Possessed by this idea, and also with a feeling of reverence for

the prayers of the old woman, who seemed at present lost to every earthly sight and sound, the girl rose from her place, and prepared to steal away unobserved. Before she could do so the little old woman hastily closed her shrine, the doors of which flew together as if by a spring, and, hanging it over her arm by a massive silver chain which was attached to it, she turned to move away. At this moment she saw the young girl, and altered her course, walking towards the intruder upon her privacy with menacing rapidity. She looked very singular, moving forward with a shuffling gait, her twisted head protruded and strained for an upward gaze ; while she supported herself partly by a large Malacca cane, with an enormous gold head.

'Who are you ?' she demanded, scanning the young girl with a look which seemed to cover her from head to feet, or more correctly

from feet to head, for the old woman's face was raised but slightly from its bowed position, and her eyes in some mysterious way made observations under conditions apparently as difficult as seeing round a corner. There was something goblin about the questioner, and the girl hesitated before she replied.

'I said, "Who are you?"' repeated the little woman, in a voice which plainly signified, 'Have I to ask twice?'

Diffidence and self-possession were mingled in the young girl's manner: she blushed, but at the same time laughed a little at the abruptness of the question.

'I am the mistress of the infant school,' she said.

'Down in the village?' inquired the old lady, indicating the locality by a motion of her walking-cane.

'Yes,' replied the girl.

'But you are late!' cried the stranger. 'It is nearly two o'clock. You ought to open school in twenty minutes.'

'I can run down the hill in ten,' cried the girl, laughing again and showing as she did so a beautiful set of teeth.

By this time the old woman was abreast of her, and walked at her side with remarkable swiftness, talking all the while.

'I shall walk with you part of the way,' she said. 'I like company, and I am interested in schools.'

This announcement was the prelude to a series of questions as to the size of the school-room, the capacities of the children, the ventilation, the time allowed for dinner, the character of the parish clergyman, and so forth; all poured out with the greatest rapidity and decision, as if the old woman might

have been reflecting on the possible condition of the infant school for weeks before. The young mistress, pleased to meet with anyone who took an interest in her pursuits, answered the questions with a vivacity and intelligence which seemed to gratify the other highly. The address of the old lady was imperious, but not disagreeable; and the schoolmistress replied to her questions with a certain air of equality which would have seemed more befitting a lady born than one of her humble rank. Yet in this there did not appear the slightest trace of pertness or presumption; and although the girl's manner caused the other to glance curiously from her coarse dress to her sweet young face, as if in quest of some sign which might explain this particular phenomenon, the look was one of inquiry only, not of annoyance. Indeed, she and her young companion were growing more

at ease every moment, when suddenly, at a turn of the hillside road, two horsemen appeared; and, as the way was narrow, one of the riders fell behind the other to make the passage easier. The young girl looked up, and, when her eyes met those of the foremost horseman, she became more beautiful than ever, but this was because a tell-tale blush painted her cheeks with the most bewitching vermilion.

The foremost horseman was a tall, large-boned young man of four or five-and-twenty. His shoulders were high, and, as his seat in the saddle was not a particularly good one, his appearance was somewhat ungraceful. In spite of this he was undeniably handsome. His hair was bright red, and dressed with scrupulous care; his eyebrows were large and well-shaped, and his complexion was, for a man, remarkably clear, and indeed, the white and

rose of his cheeks, together with the glossiness of his hair, might have raised in a suspicious mind some doubt as to whether art had not been called to the aid of Nature in these respects. The suspicion, it must be said, would have been unfounded, though not unreasonable. His eyes were grey, and the brows overhung them oddly: there was a hint of insincerity in this part of the face.

The second horseman was small and meagre, and wore an aspect of the most cynical satisfaction with himself, and equally cynical contempt for all outside him. He might have been eight-and-twenty or thirty. He, too, sat his horse uneasily, and the glass stuck in his eye was held in its place by a facial distortion of the most aggravated kind.

The tall young man raised his hat in passing. This might have been taken for a sort of silent apology to the old lady and her

companion for thrusting them into the side of the road, and indeed the horseman seemed to wish to give the civility that appearance. But, as he bowed, he glanced at the young girl, and she glanced at him, and any person of ordinary penetration could have seen that they were acquainted. The old woman went on, head down, apparently unable to see anything above the level of her face, but no sooner had the horsemen gone by than she turned sharply round on the still blushing schoolmistress, and said :

'You know that young gentleman, I see.'

The schoolmistress, who had believed that she saw nothing, made a hesitating reply, 'Yes—a little.'

'He knows you too,' continued the old lady. 'What is his name?'

'Bolton,' the young girl answered, with some uneasiness.

'Does he live in Warcaster?' pursued the other, in the same inquisitorial manner.

'Yes.'

'How comes he to know you?'

'His father is a friend of our clergyman, and he sometimes visits at the vicarage.'

'Do you visit at the vicarage too?' inquired the persistent old lady, taking no pains to conceal her surprise at the notion.

'They—at least, he sometimes comes down to see the school,' replied the girl: 'he is interested in education.' The young mistress tried to look as if she had great faith in people who were interested in education, and the utmost respect for them.

'Interested in education, is he?' repeated the old lady. 'But which do you mean—the father or the son?'

'The son,' replied the schoolmistress. Upon which her companion uttered the word

'Oh!' in a very intelligent way, and prolonged the syllable until it died out in a kind of whistle.

After this she suddenly fell into a silent fit, and trudged on without showing any inclination to speak, but striking the earth occasionally with her wonderful cane, as if suiting the action to her thoughts. The young girl seized the opportunity, and declared she must make haste down to school, or she would be late after all. She wished the old lady good-bye with the same mixture of modesty and ease which had at first surprised her, and flew forward along the shady road with nimble feet. The road made a bend, and she was out of sight.

CHAPTER II.

MASTER AND DISCIPLE.

THE two horsemen fell abreast again, when the old lady and the schoolmistress had gone by, and pursued their way up the narrow hilly road.

'Pretty little bit of flesh and blood,' remarked the smaller and elder of the two, tossing his head slightly in the backward direction.

'Of whom are you speaking?' inquired the other, in a somewhat constrained manner.

'Of the old woman, I suppose!' replied the first. 'Don't be a fool, Bolton.'

Bolton did not seem to relish the retort,

and a short silence followed, during which his companion curled his upper lip with an air of great magnificence and disdain. After this pause he recommenced, with the evident intention of teasing :

'You affect ignorance—or innocence shall we say ?—that becomes you better.' The little man with his wiry body and malicious face looked like a kind of talking scorpion. 'You are afraid that I shall poach upon your preserves—as if I should dream of competition with Adonis ! Don't do yourself an injustice, by fearing that I should outshine you in a woman's eyes. What is the beauty's name ?'

'Her name,' cried Bolton, warmly, 'is not to be mentioned by you, Detmar. It is too pure for lips like yours.'

'Thank you,' said Detmar, vivaciously. 'I confess that I am not an angel's man : the ordinary lady of the period is quite as good

as I deserve. Were she better than she is, she would scarcely suit me so well. I surrender the celestial being to you, and all I say is, when she has had a little of your society, may she continue celestial.'

Nothing more was said, for Bolton, who was used to his companion's malicious speeches, did not resent this sarcasm, and Detmar, on his part, wished to enjoy the flavour of his ill-nature in silence. The road as they traversed it changed into a green lane, which, still holding its up-hill way, became narrower, and stopped at last before a gate which opened into a field. Beyond this point there were only a few wheel-tracks and foot-prints to distinguish the farm-road from the meadows through which it ran. They were no longer in the course of the little stream, and already its cheery voice was growing indistinct, and the trees became

fewer, and soon the horsemen were riding along the bare hill-side. But whatever the nearer landscape lost, was more than recompensed by the extending beauties of the remoter country, around which the horizon widened at every step the horses took. Bolton stopped and looked at the view, while Detmar, as he waited for his companion, contrived to signify by his manner the utmost contempt for the prospect. Detmar meant that his look should be noticed, and so it was.

'Why, I wonder,' cried Bolton, with an impatient air, 'did my aunt choose you as my tutor? I do believe you delight in being disagreeable.'

Detmar smiled with the air of made-up contempt which he evidently considered very superior and disdainful.

'She had good reasons for her choice,' said he.

'They were her reasons in the strictest sense of the word,' replied Bolton. 'She never consulted my tastes.'

'Pooh,' said Detmar, shaking his head. 'You have nothing to complain of. I am to you only what I am to everybody, and I think on the whole I have made you happy. I ought to have done so, I confess, for a more good-natured pupil no man ever had.'

'You are the best fellow on earth,' answered Bolton, quite mollified. 'I wish you could make your manner a little less sarcastic.'

'Leave my manner to myself,' cried Detmar. 'Have I never told you how you fell into my hands? Your aunt, writing to Oxford, made inquiries about several men of whom she had heard, myself among the number, and she required each of us to correspond with her. Something in her letter

led me to suspect that she was not a woman to care for any religious palaver, and I framed my reply after my own heart. It was a daring venture, but I hit the mark. I was appointed your tutor and governor by return of post, while Bilton—you remember Bilton—Holy Bobby Bilton! who had turned serious, and used to talk about saving his soul, and who had written to your aunt in that key—got back an answer two lines long, telling him he was not the man. I need not laugh at him, however, for times change. I am likely, when I leave you, to be put in communication with the Earl of Trowbridge concerning his eldest son, and as his lordship is a pious person, and writes hymns, I presume I shall have to put on the salvation stop myself.'

He laughed, and his companion smiled, though not without an appearance of uneasiness.

'It appears, then, that you do not consider yourself bound by the rules of rigid truth in your negotiations,' remarked Bolton, drily.

'Where such a flimsy matter as religion is concerned—no,' replied Detmar.

No more was said until they reached the top of the hill. Here there was a large surface of level ground, two miles wide at one place, but in another direction growing narrow until it formed a kind of headland, which threw itself out upon the land beneath, as a promontory throws itself into the sea. From this point a landscape indescribably rich and variegated spread before their eyes, and far off, through the summer haze, they could see a great light shining with a steady brightness like a plate of polished steel: it was the sea, many miles away; and their gaze, rising from the rich spectacle of fields and pastures below,

met this gleam of distant flashing light, which brought with it a world of new thoughts. The whole view was rich, sunny, and glorious, and even Detmar surveyed it without a sneer.

'What folly all the rout and ambition of the world appears in the face of a scene like this!' exclaimed Bolton. 'Fools we are! spending our strength in scuffling for the tinsel decorations of society, or for the privilege of passing our lives in exhausting labours and in heated, artificial atmospheres. I could be satisfied for ever in a place like this.'

'Sporting with Amaryllis in the shade,' remarked Detmar. 'She is a pretty little Amaryllis enough, I admit, but you would tire of her.'

'I should never tire of a girl I really loved,' said Bolton.

'Let me beg of you not to talk of real love before me,' cried Detmar, turning round in his saddle, and looking his friend full in the face: 'next to the cant of the chapel, the cant of the boudoir disgusts me most. Love, indeed! What is love, pray? The love of something that gratifies yourself. And can one woman do that as well as a dozen? Can one woman be dark and fair, cold and passionate, silent and witty, tall and short, all at the same time? You might as well say you would be constant to one wine as to one woman. What a simpleton you would think me if you heard me saying, "O divine claret! paragon of wines! thou art my deity. If my lips ever touch champagne, hock, port, or Madeira, may my palate forget its cunning!" Yet this kind of respectable mania, as applied to women, is considered noble, and all the women believe in it, and some of the men

until the fit is over. Now do, Penruddocke, have the good taste not to be absurd.'

'That is all very smart,' replied Penruddocke Bolton seriously. 'But I do love that girl—with my whole soul I love her.'

'But what will papa say?' inquired Detmar, mincing his voice into a kind of nursery speech. 'And what will auntie say?'

Bolton shook his head gravely.

'There,' said he, with a sigh, 'you hit me, I confess.'

'But, Penruddocke,' said the other, speaking for the first time in a sober, remonstrating tone, 'you don't seriously mean that you would marry a village girl for the sake of her face?'

'For the sake of her face, no,' answered Bolton; 'for the sake of herself, yes.'

'In that case you must excuse my using plain language,' replied Detmar with un-

affected severity. 'You are a —— fool.' He reinforced the noun with a certain past participle which is as well understood as expressed.

'That is precisely what I should expect you to say,' remarked Penruddocke calmly.

'You would sacrifice yourself and your whole future,' continued Detmar, in a vein of sincere indignation, 'for the sake of an obscure girl, who to a certainty would sell herself and her future for five hundred pounds.'

'Detmar!' cried the young man, wheeling round with a kindling eye, 'none of your devilish suggestions, unless you wish me to knock you off your horse. This conversation must cease.'

Detmar, recovering himself, replied by a cool nod, and without exchanging another word the two set off at a brisk trot on the way home.

CHAPTER III.

DIANA'S FRIEND.

When the young men alighted at the house which had once belonged to Robert Bolton, and was still the residence of his son, they found a great chariot, of imposing appearance, drawn up before the door. Carriage, horses, and livery were all strange to Penruddocke, and he eyed the vehicle with some curiosity as he passed into the house. The entrance hall was spacious and square, and several rooms opened out of it, and Penruddocke with his tutor turned as they walked in towards a little passage which led into a conservatory. They were

just disappearing from view when a sharp voice called out :

'Mr. Bolton—is not that young Mr. Bolton ?'

Penruddocke turned round, and to his surprise saw the decrepit old lady whom he had encountered in the lane, descending the stairs under the guidance of a servant. She got to the foot of the steps, and walked across the hall with remarkable swiftness, stretching out her hand as she came.

'You are Penruddocke Bolton,' said the old lady, covering him with one of her impossible glances : 'I have heard your name many times.'

Penruddocke made a very fine bow, the courtesy of which was a little overdone ; while Detmar, taking advantage of the old woman's downward face, surveyed her with an expression of supercilious amusement.

'You are diverted with my infirmity, I perceive,' cried the old lady, addressing herself to the tutor with a sudden and waspish vivacity that confounded that important personage.

'I assure you—upon my soul——' stammered he, looking very red and foolish. But the old lady interrupted him.

'Never mind. My figure is not elegant,' she said, dismissing Detmar's rudeness with an indifference which was more galling than any reproof. 'You are the tutor, I believe?'

Detmar shrugged his shoulders, and elevated his eyebrows in a kind of silent protest against this brusque style of address; but, possessed as even he was by awe of this inexplicable old lady, who could see out of the top of her head, he did not decline to reply.

'Yes; I am Mr. Bolton's tutor,' said he.

'I shall have something to say to you pre-

sently,' continued the old lady, in a dictatorial manner which caused the great Mr. Detmar to raise his eyebrows again, for he was by no means used to such contumelious treatment. Meanwhile the stranger addressed herself to Penruddocke:

'No doubt,' said she, 'you wonder who I can be. To relieve your curiosity let me tell you that my name is Miss Crow. Perhaps you are not much wiser—but surely you must have heard of me from your Aunt Diana?'

'Certainly I have,' cried Penruddocke, with a warmth of manner which seemed highly to gratify Miss Crow. 'My aunt has mentioned your name many times, and with great regard. Any friend of hers will be welcome here.'

'You are very polite,' said Miss Crow, giving a little inclination of her head in a curious old-fashioned way. 'I am your

aunt's most intimate friend. Shortly after she came to France—where I have resided many years—we met, and through circumstances which I need not describe, we were thrown together in a way which (with persons of congenial temperament) was sure to sow and nourish a lasting friendship. Such ours has proved. For many years we have met every day, and our exchange of thought and feeling has been of the frankest kind. It may seem a great deal to say, but I am not going beyond the truth when I tell you that she knows me as well as I know myself; and I believe I know her as thoroughly. We have no secrets from each other. Her opinions—her views of religion and life—are no doubt peculiar, but I have learned to believe what she believes, and to love what she loves. Are you aware that, many years ago, your aunt made a solemn vow never to return to

England, or, at least, never to renew any of her English friendships?'

'So my father has told me,' replied Penruddocke.

'It has become necessary for me to come to England for a year,' continued Miss Crow, 'after which time my intention is to return to France, where I hope to pass the remainder of my days, in the society of my beloved friend. Like her,' said the old lady with a note of sorrow in her voice, 'I have no reason to love England; indeed, I have every reason to dislike it. That is another subject of sympathy between us: we are both voluntary exiles, and our dust shall lie at last in one grave in a foreign land.'

The old lady spoke with force and dignity, and like one who would yield to no light emotion; but when she mentioned the grave her voice quavered a little,

and there was a pathetic ring about it, and the silence which followed the close of her speech, and which neither she nor the young men seemed disposed for a time to break, was natural and affecting.

'I said I wished to speak to you,' cried Miss Crow after this pause, facing towards Detmar, and speaking now in a sharp cackling tone, and snapping her lips together between each word. 'Can you dine with me any day this week?'

'Do you mean alone?' inquired Detmar, glancing at his pupil.

'Certainly, I mean alone,' replied Miss Crow. 'The fact is,' she continued, addressing Penruddocke again, and softening her tone as she did so, 'I am going to be very naughty and tiresome. I must play spy, that I may send to your aunt a full and true account of her nephew's education. Of

course I have her orders for this, or otherwise I should be a meddlesome and impertinent old woman, but unless I greatly deceive myself my duties will be agreeable to her, and in its results profitable to yourself. Have you any objection to this plan being carried out?'

'None in the world,' cried Penruddocke, whose urbane manners seemed to delight the old lady, for she smiled as he spoke, and gave a succession of pleased little nods. 'But you must ask forgiveness for my short-comings.'

'Perhaps I shall find none,' replied the old lady, who had now, of a sudden, passed into a new mood, and murmured to herself like a purring cat. 'But I shall be inquisitorial and severe—oh, you may rely upon it I shall be severe.'

This was said with a gay sportive air truly surprising, when the speaker's warped figure

and aged, suffering look were considered. It was evident that Miss Crow was no common woman, and Detmar, who steeled himself as much as possible against the influence of character, could not overcome a dread of this mysterious personage, who from such an infirm and abject frame delivered sentiments so vigorous, in a style of such indisputable authority. Even her fun had force in it, like the gambols of a lioness —though, excepting her manner, anything less leonine than the appearance of Miss Crow could not well be imagined.

It was settled that Detmar was to dine with Miss Crow in three days time, and when this had been arranged the old lady bid the two young men good-bye; and having been escorted down the steps and into her carriage by Penruddocke, she rattled away along the stony street with great noise and pomp, and

disappeared, leaving an impression behind her akin to that which enchantresses and fairy god-mothers were wont to leave in the days of old.

'What an odd old woman,' exclaimed Penruddocke.

'And what a monstrous walking-stick,' responded Detmar. 'You might get change for ten sovereigns out of the top.'

CHAPTER IV.

MISS CROW AT HOME.

The house in which Miss Crow had taken up her abode was situated near a village which formed a kind of suburb to the city of Warcaster. The mansion was an imposing one, especially on one side, which, having been added to the original structure, was built with much costliness and taste. A stately row of pillars ran along this front, and gave to the whole edifice an almost palatial appearance, and the rooms in this part of the house were of great proportions and fine architecture. The other side of the house was much more modest and common-place,

so that anyone who had been conveyed blindfold from front to rear would surely have believed that he had seen two houses instead of one. This singular mansion was enclosed in large grounds, which were ornamented with a number of tall and venerable trees, where rooks, secure from gunshot, dwelt year after year; and either these trees or the adjacent outhouses gave lodging to a society of owls, who made the night hideous, while the rooks enlivened the day. Altogether the place had much about it that was picturesque, and even romantic, and the visitor walking through the grounds to the house felt a kind of melancholy stealing over him. Even on a bright day there was a particular gloom, a sense of solitude, pervading the scene, and when some lonely rook, winging his way here and there on high, would emit a solitary caw, the place would

seem marked out by that sound for retirement and sequestered gravity.

Along this avenue Detmar was slowly walking, at the hour appointed for dinner. He was renowned among his university friends as a conversationalist and a cynic; both his tongue and his mind were acute; and he never spared the feelings of anyone, and delighted in shocking propriety in all sorts of ways. His talk was in consequence usually remembered for its sting, if for nothing else; and knowing that his prerogative was to lash, Detmar usually went into society with a feeling of great confidence and security. But your clever talker requires an audience, and can no more make a display in a *tête-à-tête* than a diamond can sparkle without light. The consciousness that he was going to be alone may have somewhat damped his spirits; or perhaps the melancholy of the

place seized hold of him ; or, more likely still, he felt uneasy at the prospect of passing an evening with Miss Crow, whose dogmatic and snappish manners were a reproduction of his own, in a more genuine and severer form. Whatever the cause, Detmar lingered as he walked, and could have wished that the winding road would spin out a little farther the distance between himself and the house. While he thus slowly paced along he caught sight of a female form hurrying down the avenue towards him, and, as he was a great critic of the other sex, he watched the approaching person with a freedom which became more marked when he perceived that she was good-looking and young. If by this he hoped to attract attention to himself he was disappointed, for the girl, who was fleet of foot, went by and scarcely glanced at him. He had time, however, to recognise the

young woman, whom he had seen with Miss Crow on the previous day. She carried several books in her hand, and in her simple dress, and with her colour heightened by running, she looked more charming than ever, so much so, that Detmar scarcely wondered at the spell which she had cast over his friend. He turned round to gaze after her, and would have been pleased indeed had he caught her throwing a flying glance over her shoulder at him; but she was hurrying on, light as a fawn, and gave no sign of a wish to look behind her. The majestic Mr. Detmar had to confess that there was one pretty woman in the world who did not think him worth looking at twice; and chewing this comfortable reflection, he made his entry into the house.

The drawing-room faced westward, and the evening sun from behind a screen of foliage poured in a flood of soft and pleasant

light. The room was large and filled with furniture, and Detmar looked around it for his hostess, but she was nowhere to be seen. He concluded that she had not yet come down stairs, and was turning to look at some pictures on the walls, when he observed her small bent figure rising from a low couch where she had been lying. It then struck him that he had kept his eyes too high as he looked round for Miss Crow. Her level was about a foot lower than that of ordinary persons, and she had a complete set of Lilliputian furniture for herself: dwarf tables, chairs, and couches were oddly scattered here and there among the regular furniture of the room. From one of these mannikin sofas she rose, and her dwarfish figure moved across the floor, her long arm and large hand stretched out, just as Detmar had seen them in the hall of his pupil's house a day or two

before. Her manner was, however, softer and more complaisant, and she welcomed him with a courtesy which dissipated his uneasiness, though it by no means removed the particular fear with which this singular being inspired him. She helped herself across the drawing-room with the gold-headed stick which had struck him with wonder a day or two before.

Miss Crow at once started a conversation, and talked volubly about the weather, the view, the setting sun, the trees, and whatever common-place subject came up. Detmar replied with a modesty, and even a servility, that would surely have amazed his friends, who were accustomed to wait and watch until he impaled his antagonist in dialogue with a sarcasm. Miss Crow appeared very well pleased with him, and when dinner was announced she asked him to take her into the

dining-room, addressing him in a way that certainly denoted satisfaction. So Detmar, shaking off his fears, began to ask himself what sort of a dinner this curious old lady would give him. Miss Crow then took her place at the table, and her guest, from the force of habit, made a pause before sitting down.

'I never say grace,' remarked Miss Crow, who noticed his hesitation. 'Let me not prevent you.'

It was an altogether new position for Detmar. He was well used to sneer at the scruples or the religious observances of others: but an intimation, from his own side of the question, that he was free to be as irreligious as he pleased staggered him a little. He could not help reflecting, even at the moment, that an immense relish would be gone from a life like his, if society gene-

rally were to take the same view of religion as Miss Crow did; and he sat down more disposed to say grace than he had ever felt before.

The dinner was a dainty one. A spicy little soup, a bit of fish cooked to perfection, an *entrée* or two, and the usual following, came in proper order; and not only was Detmar's appetite satisfied but his vanity was soothed, for a most cosy dinner had been prepared for him. The wines, too, were excellent and cool as snow, and the cookery and the vintage together wrought him up to a mood of amiability which with him was very unusual. His hostess, too, treated him with urbanity and consideration; and when she left the room her guest took care to follow her soon, signifying in this way that, although her wines were good, he liked her company better. She appeared gratified

at this attention, and began to converse again with animation. Detmar was astonished at the extent of her knowledge and the vigour of her mind. Starting from an accidental turn in the conversation, she talked about one classical author after another with a reedom and precision which showed that she was thoroughly familiar with Greek and Latin literature. In all this she kept clear of the least appearance of pedantry, and ex pressed a deference for her guest's presumably superior knowledge and judgment in these masculine departments of learning. Detmar, being himself a clever man, could not but admire her attainments; and the kind of awe which he still felt for his hostess, together with his rising admiration for her powers, and the effect which her informed and energetic talk produced upon his mind, all co-operated to elevate him into a higher

and less artificial state of mind than was his wont. Indeed, his cynical sneering manner gradually subsided, and he found himself discussing one subject after another with sobriety and earnestness.

'I shall tire you with my questions,' said Miss Crow at last. 'Have you ever seen Miss Bolton? But why should I ask you? I know you have not seen her. Look here.'

She showed him a large portrait which stood on a side-table. It was a likeness of Diana Bolton, painted on porcelain and executed with remarkable skill. Detmar, who had corresponded with Miss Bolton for a long time, and who had besides received from her a number of cheques, the figures on which would have awakened interest in the most misanthropic of minds, looked at the portrait with attention. Diana had changed in her appearance (most people do in a quarter of a

century), but no one that had known her as a young woman could have mistaken this likeness. The figure, straight and stiff as of old, and the harsh, large features were too individual to be forgotten, or confused with those of another person. She was looking older and stouter, but she was Diana still. As Detmar studied the portrait, he was surprised to see that his hostess regarded it with an interest equal to his own. He must in some way have suffered an indication of this surprise to escape him, for Miss Crow answered the thought that was passing through his mind.

'You wonder that I look so fondly at it,' said she. 'The fact is, Diana—I mean Miss Bolton—is my dearest friend, and I have her likeness always with me. This has been painted for my own use and pleasure, and I have another, exactly similar, which I am to

give to her nephew. That reminds me,' cried the old lady suddenly, 'I have to ask you a number of questions about your pupil. Sit down again.'

She pointed to a low couch, and drawing one of her mannikin chairs to his side, so that she could freely look into his face as she talked, began her conversation.

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CHAPTER V.

A TIRESOME CHAPTER, BUT NOT TO BE SKIPPED.

'My friend, Miss Bolton,' said the old lady, 'is a woman of strong feelings, and of strong affections too, though many might doubt it. In youth and early womanhood her father was the object of all her esteem and love, and even to the present hour she cherishes his memory with a passionate devotion the like of which I have never seen. Hers is a nature not to be engaged by mere sentiment, and I suspect that even her love for her father was rooted in admiration for his singular gifts of mind and character. Indeed, so far as I can judge, he must have

been a person of extraordinary capacity, and his death was to his daughter one of those profound shocks which, so far from passing off with time, take years to make themselves fully felt. Of course my acquaintance with her is of later date than that event, but from what she has told me I am led to think that since the time of her bereavement her health was feeble and precarious: she has suffered from a variety of strange maladies, and for months together she has been hanging between life and death. Another misfortune befell her. Her father had left behind him the materials for several volumes of essays on religious and philosophical subjects, and these she intended to edit carefully and publish. She grew quite enthusiastic over this project, and was beginning to find her father again in his works, when, by the accident of a fire, which broke out in the house where she lived, all these

precious remains were destroyed. I have heard that in a wild attempt to rescue them from the flames she nearly lost her own life, and did in fact inflict upon herself most serious bodily injuries. After this disaster she was confined to her bed for eighteen months, and at that time—several years after her father's death—I formed her acquaintance. I did not believe—no one believed—that she could long survive, but in the end a strong constitution prevailed over prostration and injury, and she partially recovered her health. Upon her sick bed she contracted a friendship for me. Look at me—a poor deformed old woman, whose very appearance provokes a smile. I could not mix in society—indeed, I hated society, and with good reason. Can you wonder if I hailed with delight the prospect of an undivided and congenial friendship? We clung

to each other. She became my guide and teacher. One by one I abandoned my old notions and embraced her opinions, and now, in every particular, we are one.

'She has told me the whole history of her life. She had a half-brother whom she hated. He was one of those persons who, by a pleasing exterior and a kind of worthless amiability, secure the good opinion of the world; but he was a man of no principle—weak, impulsive, and licentious in the actual, if not in the conventional sense. This man, after a career of recklessness and folly, died at an early age—the woman he married died first—leaving one child, a daughter, to an inheritance of disgrace and beggary. My friend Diana, with a nobleness of soul which is peculiarly her own, went to her brother on his deathbed, and offered to take charge of the child, and make her heiress of her pro-

perty. Madman as he was, he flung the offer in his sister's face, because she would not undertake to instruct the child in the doctrines of the Church of England. To her this was a greater disappointment than she cared to confess. She had set her heart on having a child whom she could train and educate in a rational and truthful way, and she could not reconcile herself to the idea of adopting the child of a stranger. At last Mrs. Hercules Bolton—another most objectionable person—died, and Diana seized the opportunity, and by an arrangement with her brother secured the control of Penruddocke's education. She placed him in the charge of a German tutor, whose character she knew well, and he—as no doubt you have heard—superintended the boy's instruction for two years. He was succeeded by a Frenchman, who for the two years following had almost

sole charge of the lad. Both these persons were trustworthy in the matter of religion, and did, I believe, carry out with the most scrupulous care my friend's commands : most rigidly, and at every possible opportunity, they instilled into the boy's mind the hollowness and absurdity of religious belief. Diana—I must call her by that name—was not, however, satisfied with this. She corresponded regularly with her nephew, and while trying to impress him with her views, she took care to draw out his own opinions. This correspondence has been continued to the present time.'

'That,' remarked Detmar, 'I am aware of.'

'What!' exclaimed Miss Crow, 'have you seen the letters?'

'Never,' he replied, 'but I knew that letters were exchanged.'

'Quite proper,' cried Miss Crow, nodding

her head. 'Well, by this means my friend has arrived at a pretty fair notion of the state of her nephew's mind. She is not altogether satisfied with it.'

'I am sorry to hear that,' said Detmar; 'what is the fault?'

'She considers him very clever and highly cultivated,' replied the old lady. 'He is wanting in thoroughness. Some would call him sympathetic—perhaps you call him so. That is only a flattering name for a sentimentality which predisposes men to feebleness in conduct and indecision in thought. Let me give you an example. Some months ago, in one of her letters, my friend proposed this question—"Can belief in a falsehood ever be salutary to a man's moral welfare?" and requested him to send her a full and reasoned reply. He answered, "Yes," and supported his affirmation by citing a

number of religious doctrines, which, as he said, are manifestly untrue, yet he contended that it would not be easy to find any truths which would take their place or do their work. What was still more grievous, he went on to say that for this reason we should be very cautious and gentle in dealing with men's religious opinions. His aunt was greatly pained at this letter, for she is impatient of weakness, and of amiable weakness most of all.'

'Still you must remember,' said Detmar, 'there is something in Penruddocke's argument. We say in Oxford——'

'A great many things which you will unsay before long,' said Miss Crow with some acidity. 'You have two schools of thought now, and both are to be blamed. Your misanthropic school thinks every opinion equally worthless, because it does

not value human life and human nature sufficiently to be in earnest; and your sentimental school sees good in everything. There is another school which I do not mention, which likes to flaunt its views in the face of clergymen and ladies, that it may have the pleasure of hearing itself called blasphemous or naughty. Persons who play these tricks are to sober thinkers what monkeys are to men.'

Detmar winced a little.

'My friend Diana thinks—her father thought—and I, if I may speak, think too—that if religion is a lie, it is the most tremendous lie ever was told. It deserves no quarter—no mercy. Now we know quite well that religion is a lie, and must be; and our duty is to get rid of it—to disinfect the world, whose very air is poisoned with the falsehoods of faith.'

Detmar said nothing.

'My friend,' continued Miss Crow, 'had two objects in undertaking the education of her nephew. First, she wished to find one who might, if properly qualified, present to the world the opinions of her father, so far as she by memory could recover them, in an attractive shape; and next, she wished to show to all the world that a man, true as the stars, honest as the noonday—a man who would excel all your saints in steady virtue—might be produced not only without religious teaching—that would be a small thing—but on the very meat and drink of a teaching whose A B C is, All religion is a lie.'

In this strain Miss Crow went on for a long time, talking with a fluency and energy which amazed her guest. In spite of his immoderate self-conceit, and his love of being thought outrageous, Detmar was forced to

confess to himself that he was only a dwarf in unbelief after all. He felt as a child might feel, whose tin sword is laid beside a real blade, made ready for death. He managed, however, to listen to Miss Crow, and to answer her apparently to her satisfaction. She proceeded to ask him a multitude of questions about his pupil's character and habits, and took copious notes of what he said, which notes, she remarked, she meant to send to Miss Bolton. At last she dismissed her visitor, who, as he groped his way down the dark avenue, pondered with unusual gravity the revelation of character which had just been made to him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SCHOOLMISTRESS.

It was a sunny afternoon, and the little children in the infant school of Uphill were going through their list of songs, as was the custom each day before breaking up. This branch of the schooling was wisely reserved for a time when the children were apt to be growing tired, and it never failed to bring back beams of light to weary little eyes, and to make each small drooping frame start up in fresh vigour. For not a child in the school was so young or so dull but it thought the singing lesson as good as the merriest game out of doors.

And no wonder. The very deaf might, for a treat, have taken lessons of the sweet young mistress. She sang not with her voice alone, but with her eyes, with her daintily nodding head, with her parted lips which moved into a dozen pretty expressions every verse. Her white little hand was more lively than a conductor's baton ; her body waved like a willow when the song was low and soft ; and her feet danced, all the time no doubt, only now and again they would peep from beneath her dress, when the strain grew merry, and they forgot themselves. The girl was embodied music all the time. If the songs she sang could have taken human shape, the shape would have been hers : she so made herself one with the sense and the sound. All kinds of pretty songs were sung—about butterflies, and daisies, and fields, and running streams, and little lambs playing in the sun ; or songs

about common life, baking bread, making shoes, cleaning rooms ; each illustrated by action, which the little ones imitated as their mistress went through it. If the song were about flowers, and brooks, and birds, and blue skies, the girl's eyes would half close in a dreamy sort of way, and her voice would sink into the softest note, as if her fancy were painting all around her on the empty air pictures so real that she seemed standing amidst the things of which she sang. The children would quickly catch her tone and her look, so that she and they would seem as if singing themselves to sleep, and already passing over its dreamy threshold. Then all of a sudden everybody would waken up. The baker's song was coming, or mother was going to clean the house, or Mr. Last had a shoe to make. How she rolled out her dough with graceful movements, such as no human

baker ever made! How she sent the dust flying away before her sweeping brush in puffing clouds, to make the room clean, clean, clean; or rubbed at the dusky windows to make them bright, bright, bright; and that shoe—with what fairy hammer-taps it was formed, and with what tight, determined lips she beat it into shape upon the last; every child on the gallery rolled, or swept, or hammered as if they were earning their bread in hard earnest, and some of the little ones grew quite hot over it. Again came a pause. Hush! and every child was still. Then all waited for a moment in speechless expectation, until the clock of the parish church was heard to strike one—and each little voice knelled a solemn 'one,' 'two,' 'three,' 'four,' and the children cried 'two,' 'three,' 'four.' Then came the word of command—'Eyes closed,' and eighty pairs of little eyelids were

shut up as fast as a miser's chest. 'Hands together,' and eighty pairs of little hands were folded reverently. Then the clear voice of the mistress rang out with 'Glory to Thee, my God, this night,'—it might have been an angel, so pure and lofty was the note—and a company of tiny voices followed after. Then 'Attention;' and then tramp, tramp, tramp, making as much noise as one hundred and sixty little stamping feet could make, out the whole school marches, and the labours of the young mistress are over for another day.

She put her hands to her shoulders, like one going to execute a calisthenic exercise, but with her it was only a token of weariness, and she drew in a long breath, and sent it out again in a sigh.

'You seem tired,' cried some one at her side, and she knew that she had heard the voice before. She turned round and saw

Miss Crow, who had come into the room unperceived.

'The singing was very good,' remarked the old lady with a pleased air. 'I think that certain children that I could mention are highly favoured in their teacher.'

The schoolmistress acknowledged the compliment with a smile—rather, however, Miss Crow thought, as a lady might receive a civility from an equal.

'I came in to ask you to come and have your tea with me this evening,' said Miss Crow, when she had spoken a few words about the school. 'Are you disengaged?'

The girl's face grew red with pleasure.

'Certainly——ma'am,' she replied. 'I shall be delighted.'

'Can you come at once?' Miss Crow inquired.

The schoolmistress glanced down at her

dress, which was a sort of blue serge, and evidently made for use in the school.

'Don't change your dress,' said the old lady, noticing the glance, 'you look very nice.'

'Oh, but I must,' replied the girl. It was plain that half her pleasure would be gone if she were not to make herself fine for the occasion; so Miss Crow said no more about the matter, but remarking that she would expect her in an hour's time, trudged away without another word.

The old lady's house was not five minutes' walk from the little cottage in which the young mistress lodged, so she had time enough for grand preparations. To her this tea was a great event, and she prepared for it with as much solemnity, and far greater joy, than if she had been a duchess going to Court. She took out her two or three simple dresses for

review, and judged their merits with a beating heart. At last she made bold, and chose the most gorgeous of all, a flowery muslin, which she in her simplicity thought almost too brave for the occasion. It is not for us to peep at that anxious toilet process. Forth she came at last, looking as fresh and sweet as a wild rose ; and when she had plucked a few flowers from the garden, and tied them into a little nosegay to wear in her breast, she felt ready for company, and with a fluttering heart set out for Miss Crow's house. She felt not a little frightened when the door was opened, for the man-servant was austere and magnificent, and of enormous stature, and he frowned upon her with great disdain. In fact, it had been rumoured in the servants' hall that the schoolmistress was going to sit down with the lady of the house, and the aristocracy of the kitchen felt hurt, and had agreed

after consultation to deport themselves so as to let the visitor know that, in spite of this momentary elevation, she was only trumpery after all. The gigantic man-servant conducted the blushing young woman to the door of a small drawing-room and left her there, for the potentate had decided to draw the line between duty and independence by declining to turn the handle. So she had to tap timidly for admission herself, and Miss Crow's voice was heard calling from within, 'Come in.' She entered, and the old lady saw that the stranger had been left alone outside the door.

'Where is my servant?' she cried, without stopping to welcome her visitor.

'Gone down stairs, ma'am,' replied the girl, trembling a little, for she saw that a storm was gathering.

The old lady went to the bell, and rang it angrily.

'Viles,' she cried, when the man appeared, 'did you show this young lady upstairs?'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Viles, who looked excessively alarmed.

'And you left her outside the door, to make her way in as well as she could?' continued the old lady.

Viles did not answer, but turned the door-handle nervously.

'Did you?' screamed the old lady.

She stamped with her foot as she spoke, and Viles in his terror jumped a little, as if he were a Brobdingnagian toy worked by the toes of his mistress.

'Well, ma'am——you see,' he said with a look of misery which might have gained forgiveness for a murderer, 'I made a little mistake.'

'That you certainly did,' retorted Miss Crow. 'However, you shall set it right.

Open the door, and hold it open. My child, she continued, addressing the schoolmistress, 'be so kind as to step outside for a minute. Perhaps by this time Viles will know how to act in his capacity of menial.'

There was nothing for the poor girl but to obey, so she went out, and it would have been hard to say which felt more uneasy, she or Viles, upon finding themselves together on the other side of the door. Viles appeared like a person under a strong galvanic current, who struggles to maintain his composure. He opened the door, however, and called out—

'A young lady to see you, ma'am,' and so ushered the schoolmistress respectfully in.

Miss Crow advanced with a formal air to salute her visitor; and Viles went down stairs for the second time, with a vague idea in his mind that he would set fire to the house that

night, and try to arrange matters so that his mistress might be burned alive.

Miss Crow meanwhile made not the smallest reference to what had just happened, but with an unusual complaisance begged the young girl to take a seat, saying that she had some pictures to show her which would occupy them until teatime.

CHAPTER VII.

TEA AND TALK.

TEA was set out in the dining-room, and no sooner were they seated than Miss Crow, to the great relief of her guest, ordered the servant who waited—it was not the unhappy Viles—to go down stairs. 'For,' said she, 'we shall be far more snug alone.'

This was an immense relief to the young girl, as no doubt Miss Crow meant it to be. She had now leisure to admire the table and equipage, for Miss Crow seemed to grow less awful in her eyes, or rather she began to feel

that she herself, being a humble person, scarcely worth powder and shot, would not be molested by the irritable old lady. So she gave herself up to admiration and enjoyment. She had never seen an urn like that before her, which was of silver, richly chased, and hissing out steam, for a little spirit lamp flamed beneath. She calculated that this urn alone would cost a comfortable year's income. The table-linen too was snowy white, and the most charming floral patterns adorned the damask. Every spoon was a mirror ; the china was a marvel of device ; the butter seemed of fairy mould ; and the roasted chicken was in respect of cooking a very Arabian bird. She had a good appetite, and this choice repast, with its elegant surroundings, was by far the greatest treat she had ever known in her simple life.

'I am sure you must be hungry,' said

Miss Crow. 'Now you know, if you mean to please me you must make a good tea.'

And with greater dexterity than could have been expected of her, she applied herself to the carving of the fowl. She whipped the liver wing off in a twinkling, and set it before her guest with her own hands.

'Potato!' she cried, 'where is the potato? Don't move,' she added, as the girl rose to fetch the dish from the opposite side of the table. She brought it round herself, and noticed with surprise that her guest allowed her to do the waiting, without any fussy apologies about the trouble or her condescension. There was an ease about all this which was unaccountable in the mistress of a parish school.

'Now,' said Miss Crow, when everything

had been arranged, and she had cut off a tiny morsel and put it on her plate, 'we seem quite comfortable.'

'Comfortable, ma'am,' said the young girl, with a charming simplicity; 'I never saw anything so beautiful as this table before. And this chicken is delicious.'

'Do you think so, my dear?' cried the old lady, looking up with a smile that made her features quite pleasing. 'Well, if it gives you pleasure, that is just what I meant it should do. You need not say ma'am to me—when we are alone.'

The meal progressed, Miss Crow nibbling her morsel and the schoolmistress eating with an appetite. She finished her wing, and when asked to have another, blushed, and said 'No;' but little Miss Crow, as if she guessed that her visitor had not such dainties often, laid the second wing before her, say-

ing—'When I was your age, my dear, I could eat anything.'

After the chicken came strawberries, and the visitor was lost in admiration of the glass and silver shell, opening into two pretty basins, one for cream and the other for sugar. Such fruit—such cream—such sugar had surely never before crossed human lips.

'Everything is beautiful in this house,' she murmured, in a kind of grateful wonder.

'Perhaps so—to those who have eyes for beauty,' replied Miss Crow. 'Many people would see nothing in it.'

'But they are used to fine things,' remarked the girl. 'All that I see is new to me.'

'I hope it does not make you envious?' said the old lady gaily.

'Not the least,' was the reply. 'I always feel as if everything I admire be-

longed to me in a sort of way. It is mine so far as it gives me pleasure.'

This speech caused Miss Crow to look up in surprise, and in admiration too, for though the sentiment might seem affected, the manner of its utterance was most artless. They talked together in this way, Miss Crow growing more interested every moment, and the young girl more winningly natural. At last, when the meal was ended, the old lady proposed that they should go into a small sitting-room, which opened out of the dining-room ; and here they sat down, looking out upon the tall trees and the declining sun. The schoolmistress wondered within herself how she could feel so much at ease. Conversation dropped before long, and the two sat on in silence, each excusing herself from speech by watching the sky.

A beam of sunlight, softened by passing

through the foliage, fell upon the young girl's face as she shifted her chair a little.

'There is something I very much wonder about,' she said, sinking dreamily back, and looking very lovely in the mild radiance which singled her out, and put her in a kind of setting of sunlight.

'What is that, my dear?' said Miss Crow with an encouraging look.

'Shall we know each other in heaven?' continued the schoolmistress, looking still at the glowing West.

Miss Crow's face turned harsh all at once.

'I know nothing about heaven,' she said snappishly. 'I have never seen it marked on the celestial globes.'

The girl seemed a little shocked; but then, as if she made up her mind that the old lady meant nothing irreverent, she went on: 'Be-

cause if we do, perhaps I shall see my father and mother there.'

'You are an orphan then, child?' inquired Miss Crow in a softened voice.

'I was a baby when my father and mother died,' said the schoolmistress, 'and I have never been able to find out who brought me up.'

'Had you no friends?' asked Miss Crow.

'Friends I had indeed,' replied the girl; 'but who they are I do not know. I have been watched over by somebody who has clothed and fed me and paid for my education. The vicar knows who it is, I think, but he will not let me into the secret. Do you know, ma'am, I have been taught to dance, and to play on the piano, and to paint!' she made this last confession with an amusing air of wonder, as if painting were the crown

of accomplishments, and an art for princesses only.

'Have you, my dear?' said Miss Crow, in tones of equal surprise.

'Yes, indeed, I have,' the girl cried, speaking eagerly now that she had fairly begun, 'and when I was a child I was always dressed neatly, and had a little pocket-money; and even now I get a present every month, though I am told I must learn to support myself. That is why I teach the school.'

'Are you quite sure your father is dead?' asked Miss Crow, discovering some incredulity in her voice.

'Oh, quite sure,' was the answer; 'and this unknown friend has watched over me all my life.'

Miss Crow nodded her head, and asked no more questions. To her the mystery of the girl's refined manner and appearance was

solved at once. The 'friend' who had in this unseen way pursued her through life, was bound to her by a nearer tie than friendship. She was the child of someone who did not care to acknowledge her; a child born without wedlock, but not, as the event had proved, without tenderness. Once this notion was started concerning the schoolmistress, it was easy enough to fancy her, with her delicate features and white skin, and her unconscious elevation, the daughter of a nobleman. Miss Crow, after this disclosure, watched her with increasing admiration, and she privately resolved to throw aside before long the affectation of social superiority which until now she had for obvious reasons maintained.

They conversed together until the shining of the evening star told the young schoolmistress that she had already stayed, as it

seemed, too long. She rose from her seat: 'Good night, ma'am,' said she ingenuously; 'I had forgotten how late it was getting. In all my life I never spent so happy a night.'

'Come again soon, then,' said the old lady kindly; 'you are a good girl. Good night to you, my dear.'

She shook hands with her guest and gave her a little caress—a small, kindly pat with her fingers, and the girl went home with a pleased and grateful heart, quite in love with her hostess, as is the way with warm-hearted young people when they meet with unexpected kindness. But when she recalled the old lady's outbreak of anger against her man-servant, she asked herself how the violent and the kind old woman could be one and the same Miss Crow?

CHAPTER VIII.

A PHOTOGRAPH.

THE acquaintanceship ripened fast into friendship. Before that week was out, Miss Crow paid another visit to the school, and as she departed gave a second invitation to tea, which was joyfully accepted. On this occasion it was settled that the young schoolmistress should spend each Saturday evening with her patroness, and so it came to pass that, in a month's time, an intimacy was established between the two.

The schoolmistress soon learned two facts concerning Miss Crow: that she was a mysterious person, whose figure, character,

and manner of life were alike inviting to curiosity; and that she was hedged about with an impenetrable reserve. She was fond of talking about herself, and her experience of life; but although she freely indulged herself in this particular, and would tell long stories about her childhood and youth, it was surprising how little she let fall that threw any light on her personal or family history. Her age, the schoolmistress guessed, must be seventy at least; but she often remarked to herself that Miss Crow, through the whole course of her numerous and somewhat tedious stories about her own adventures, never once gave a clue to the date of her birth. She never mentioned a relative, nor a home, although she was constantly recalling incidents which showed that she had always been a person of wealth and importance, and—for this was her constant topic—of singular force and

individuality of character. In a word, Miss Crow was egotistical, very egotistical, but in an open and resolute manner, which almost obliterated the common marks of that habit. The feats of will she performed in childhood —the dry abstruse books which chained her attention, at the period when most children read fairy-tales—the miracles of memory of which she was capable in her early years— these she would rehearse hour after hour. She was also fond of hinting, in a sidelong sort of way, that in her youth she had been thrown among persons whose views of life differed altogether from her own, and who, in consequence of this, misunderstood her and opposed her. But she always got her way at last by sheer force of resolution. She was always right, and they were always wrong; and not only the victory, but the demonstration of sagacity lay on her side in the long run. In

a thousand ways—at one time by flattery, at another time by enmity—the world had tried to mould her, to change her, to beat her into its own shape, but always in vain. Whether as child or woman, she had always her own way of doing and thinking, and that way she pursued inflexibly, and she never regretted her firmness. In a word, the constitution of the universe might be wrong, but she was, and would be, right in everything.

Such a character might seem despicable, but the idea of despising Miss Crow never crossed the mind of the schoolmistress. Indeed, nothing can be contemptible that is not weak, and the egotism of Miss Crow was full of strength. If she was not all that she thought herself, she was a great deal more than most people could ever be. She was strenuous, unquailing, and clear-headed; and her imperious and dogmatic manner was to

her vigorous nature just what a sword is to the strong and courageous soldier. It was the instrument—the terrible instrument—of a disposition formed for conflict. A braggart severity of manner in some persons finds a very timid and feeble equivalent in their temperament, but whatever fears the demeanour of Miss Crow inspired were only the danger-signals of a character which, when offended, was to be dreaded indeed.

And yet she could be gentle, and kind, and even playful. In such moods she would permit, or enjoy, a lively sally at her own expense. There was sentiment in her nature, too, and on those rare occasions when anything moved her she would suppress her emotions with a dignity which was remarkably impressive. She evidently thought that feeling ought to be a secret thing.

Her knowledge was prodigious. She had

been a diligent student all her life, and had read over the whole field of literature, here, there, and everywhere. She could divide a difficult question of morals or philosophy with a sentence; and as her habit of mind was essentially practical, her opinions were generally expressed in the most demonstrative and convincing shape. For sentimental or speculative philosophy she had no mercy. With her everything must be of the earth, earthy. She wanted fact under her feet, she said, such as could be trodden on, and smelled, and handled. If other people liked unseen worlds, or conjectures about what ought to be, and would be in the future, they were welcome to what they could find: she preferred the bullion of this world to the paper money of the next; at least, until she was credibly informed by somebody, who had been there and back again, that these

promises to pay were duly redeemed. This way of expressing such opinions was coarse, no doubt, and it might have been thought flippant; but this was not the case. The thorough reality of her nature, which raised her egotism above paltry self-conceit, made her unbelief respectable. Her views upon religion she owed, she declared, to her friend Diana. She was very fond of expressing them, and the young schoolmistress, who felt shocked at first, and closed her ears, began to grow fascinated, and listened at last, not without pain, but not without interest either.

Miss Crow was a recluse. As soon as it was fairly known in the neighbourhood that she was a person of wealth and importance, callers flocked to the house; first the smaller fry, who felt pleased to leave a card on anybody, but at last those of greater dignity. One and all they were treated with

cutting indifference. Miss Crow never saw a visitor, and replied to their courtesy by dropping a card at their doors as she drove by. At this frigid response to their overtures some took offence. Others, of more patient or persevering disposition, called again, but this time no notice was taken of them, and they gave the matter up. Even to tradespeople Miss Crow was invisible. If they called about any important business they were perhaps admitted to the ante-room of her apartment in which she usually sat in the morning, and a servant conveyed messages to and fro; or sometimes she would call out her directions in a loud voice, but except once or twice none ever saw her. She walked out in the village day by day, but her veil was always down; and when she went into the city she drove in her great chariot, from which she never descended, except at her own doorstep.

Her servants were strangers in the locality, and either would not tell, or did not know, anything of her antecedents. One gossiping carpenter in the village did, indeed, declare that he had known her visit York—of which city he was a native—fifteen years before, and could swear to her little hooped figure anywhere. There, he said, she lived more quietly but still in strict privacy, and he was positive that she left the place in debt. This story was widely circulated and found believers, though some who knew the author well said that the mere fact of his telling a thing made it unworthy of belief: because, if there was not a lie in it to begin with, he would add one, as a sort of stamp, just as the makers of a particular china put a private mark on the fabrics which they issue. However, as nothing except this York story was known about Miss Crow, and people like to believe something, it gradually obtained a

footing in Uphill ; and at last everybody said that Miss Crow had come from York.

The schoolmistress of course got glimpses into the private life of her condescending patroness. Miss Crow's habits, she soon found out, were of the most abstinent kind. She ate but little, and that of the plainest food, living for the greater part on milk and bread ; and she seemed to find a pleasure in laying a dry crust on her own plate when a tasty meal was smoking on the table. She never went to rest until two o'clock in the morning, and rose punctually at six ; and almost the whole of her waking time was spent, she said, in study. Her tables teemed with books and periodicals, and every book was cut open, and marked in places by her diligent pencil ; and in most cases she wrote a brief summary of the contents, and a line or two of criticism, on the title page. Of music she appeared not to know anything, and in

spite of an attempt to show taste in painting, it was evident that she had only the faintest interest in art of any sort. A kindred apathy seemed to possess her with regard to poetry. She would talk about Pope's Homer, or the historical plays of Shakespeare, but for the poetry of feeling and ideality she expressed thorough dislike. Hard fact, hard thought, were her meat and drink.

Thus, line by line, as it were, the schoolmistress kept spelling out the character of this remarkable old woman. The young girl could form pretty sound and penetrating judgments, and before long she had, from her own observation, formed an estimate of Miss Crow. She was powerful in mind and unamiable in temper, but capable under certain circumstances of deep and true affection; and also—the schoolmistress believed—she was not equally strong all round her nature,

but had weak and accessible points, unknown to herself. She had all the hardness and ungainliness of mind and taste which belongs to Puritans, but none of their piety; and she had the surface and materialised view of human life which is the mark of light and heartless unbelief, joined with an earnestness and moral fervour such as leads men on to martyrdom. Whatever she might be, she was at all times herself. She showed no traces of slow evolution or hereditary instincts, but was a species by herself; and while it seemed a precarious task to love her, it was equally clear that whoever set themselves to dislike her out-and-out would find that at times—like a break of fair and fertile country in a dry and barren land—a glimpse of warm humanity would relieve the austerity of her character, and invite, or almost compel admiration.

CHAPTER IX.

MERCY'S RIVAL.

'It is the most singular thing in the world,' said Miss Crow one evening, as she and her young friend sat together, 'that I have never asked you what is your name.' She did not say she was ignorant of it.

'My name is Travis,' replied the girl, blushing very deeply as she spoke—so much so that Miss Crow wondered if she was after all in the secret of her birth and parentage. 'Mercy Travis.'

'How do you spell it?' Miss Crow continued; and when her question was answered she remarked that it was a curious name,

and would in all probability give a clue to her parents some day.

'That is,' said Miss Crow, catching herself up, 'a clue to who they were, my dear.'

'Travis is not my real name,' observed the young girl. 'I know that much. It has been given to me for a purpose. When I am twenty-two I shall know all about myself.'

'How old are you now?' asked Miss Crow.

'I was twenty-one some months ago,' replied the girl. 'If I live a little longer I shall know who I really am. Do you know, ma'am,' she went on, laughing, 'I shall not be surprised if I turn out to be a lady?'

'That,' said Miss Crow, patting her on the cheek, 'you are already.' Mercy had come

to tea in the usual way; and now, seeing a basket of roses and other flowers on a table in the corner, she gave a little cry of pleasure, like a child.

'What beautiful flowers! How I should like to make the room look pretty—if I may!' she cried, half-frightened at her own presumption.

'Very good,' said Miss Crow, nodding her head with a good-humoured air. 'Let me see how clever you are.'

Mercy took the basket up, saluting each rose as she drew it forth with an exclamation of delight: one was such a size, another such a colour, a third had such a perfect shape, and a fourth had a dewdrop in its breast. It was a pretty sight to see the girl hanging over the flowers, and tripping with them from one vase to another, and dipping her head down on one side as she studied the different

effects. Miss Crow watched her with great interest.

'I never thought flowers could look so charming,' said the old lady, glancing, however, from the flower to the flower-holder. 'Never.'

'Flowers not look charming!' cried Mercy, in accents which showed that in her eyes such an idea was high treason. 'Oh, ma'am, in all the world I love nothing so much as flowers!'

'By the way,' said Miss Crow, while Mercy went on with her work, 'do you remember that first day when you met me in the copse? As we walked down the hill a young gentleman met us.'

'I remember him,' replied Mercy. She bent over her basket, and, taking out a red rose, began to smell it; and the colour from the blossom stole over her cheeks.

'He is a friend of mine,' remarked Miss Crow.

'A friend of yours, ma'am!' cried Mercy, in great surprise.

'Look at this portrait,' said Miss Crow, pointing to the picture of Diana which always stood on the table beside her. 'Do you see any likeness to him there?'

'No,' answered Mercy, bending attentively over the portrait. 'He is very handsome, ma'am; and this'—she stopped for a moment —'this is—is——'

'Very plain, you wish to say,' said the old lady quite graciously. 'You are right. Still very handsome people may show a likeness to very plain people. I try to think there is a resemblance.'

'Try to think,' repeated Mercy, struck by the serious and even sorrowful voice of her patroness. 'What do you mean, ma'am?'

'That,' continued Miss Crow, indicating the picture by a movement of her head, 'is his aunt, Diana Bolton, the dearest friend I have in the world. I believe she loves her nephew as she loves her own soul.'

One of the old lady's few fits of emotion came over her at these words, and she said no more, but seemed busy trying to keep her feelings down. Mercy stood lost in wonder at this disclosure, and at the strange way in which it was made.

'He is handsome,' said the old lady at last, speaking in a low, earnest tone. 'And he is clever, and good, and all that a young man ought to be. Don't you think so?'

'I do—I do,' cried Mercy, clasping her hands, before she knew what she did.

'But what have you to say to it?' called out Miss Crow, changing her manner sud-

denly. 'What do you know about him?' Her voice struck into the curious note half-snarl and half-cackle which was usual with her when she felt or affected vexation.

'I know him a little,' replied Mercy, covered with confusion. 'Just a very little. He visits at the vicarage, as I told you.'

Miss Crow appeared satisfied with this reply, and immediately flew off into praises of Penruddocke Bolton, whom she seemed to admire as heartily as his aunt could possibly do. Beginning with his red hair and forehead, and descending to his feet, she extolled his person with delight, and even with pride. She tried to turn his defects into graces:

'His hair is very red, but the quality of it is good.'

'That is precisely what I think,' answered Mercy, who had grown warm with

the subject, and was off her guard. This sally, however, escaped notice; or at least it was not rebuked.

'Would you call his shoulders high—and —and large?' asked Miss Crow.

'Perhaps so,' Mercy replied. 'Just a little.'

'But he looks all the stronger and manlier for it,' remarked the old lady.

In this way the two continued for a time to sound the praises of Penruddocke, until there was not a feature of his face or a point of his character which had not been admired. Most of all Miss Crow declared her admiration for his uprightness and truthfulness: in the higher departments of character she protested her belief he would be found little short of perfect.

'And that, my dear, is the end and the crown of all education,' said the old lady.

'Let us produce honest men and women, and who shall dare to call our method wrong?'

Mercy, not understanding this remark, gave an inquiring glance at Miss Crow, of which, however, she took no notice.

'One thing I must tell you,' she said, with a searching look into the young girl's face. 'His aunt thinks that he ought to marry and settle in life.'

'Does she, ma'am?' replied Mercy, who had all at once discovered that her sleeve-link was unfastened.

'She is quite right,' continued the old lady. 'It is well for young men to get married soon: it puts an end once and for ever to one of the most serious illusions of life. Some men are born to be fools, and will be fools under all possible circumstances; but there is a particular kind of folly which never survives long after marriage. Have you

never noticed, my dear, that the silliest of husbands will talk more sensibly about married life than the wisest of bachelors? The reason is very plain. Wisdom is a good thing, but it cannot do the work of experience; the greatest blockhead in the world, if he had been to the moon, could tell more about it than the cleverest astronomer who had only studied it through a telescope. Now, with sentimental young men, unless they are married early, the state of matrimony is the grand illusion of life, and it colours everything. Marry them, and you strike one falsehood out of their minds, and leave them readier for the clear cold light of pure thought. You think so, don't you, my child?'

'I hardly know what to say,' Mercy answered.

'To be sure you don't,' cried the old

lady, with surprising gaiety. 'You have not been to the moon yet! However, Diana is determined that her nephew shall marry at once.'

'And do you think, ma'am,' said Mercy, in a low, timid voice, 'that he will do as his aunt wishes?'

'Do as his aunt wishes!' repeated Miss Crow, starting like one upon whom a dazzling light has suddenly flashed. 'He will. He must. Do you not know, my child, that both Penruddocke and his father are dependent on the bounty of Diana Bolton? Had it not been for her noble and self-sacrificing benevolence the father would have been a bankrupt, and the son a beggar. Oh, you may rest assured neither of them would venture to resist her will, nor will she be persuaded to change her mind; for I tell you, well as

she loves Penruddocke, if he disobeyed her she would leave him without a shilling in the world ; and if he were dying at her feet, she would not put a cup of cold water to his lips to save him. She would be right, too—right —quite right!'

The old woman rose from her chair and walked up and down the room in great excitement, stamping on the floor angrily at intervals, and opening and shutting her hands, like an animal seizing at its prey. She looked strange and fearful, for her small bent figure trembled, and wave after wave of violent feeling swept convulsively over her face.

'That,' she said, resuming her seat, 'is a thing of which I never thought. It might happen, of course, but I think there is no great reason to fear it.' Miss Crow was

either not conscious of her violence or did not choose to offer any excuse for it. Mercy, although she had before seen something of the temper of her patroness, sat in silence, pale and frightened.

'Yes, he will marry,' said the old lady, after a pause, speaking with her usual composure. 'And he will marry the person whom his aunt has chosen for him.'

'Miss Bolton has made a choice, has she, ma'am?' Mercy asked, in a voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

'Yes,' Miss Crow replied. 'She has settled whom he is to marry. He does not know of her choice.'

Mercy had reasons of her own for looking very white and sad when she heard this, and it needed no great observation to see that she was struggling to keep back her tears. But

Miss Crow, who appeared not to notice anything, took the talking upon herself, and chatted on upon all sorts of subjects until seven o'clock struck and the schoolmistress rose to leave. Then, to her surprise, the old lady raised her bowed head a little, saying :

'Kiss me, my child, before you go.'

CHAPTER X.

TEARS AND HOPE.

No sooner had Mercy Travis got outside the house but she burst into tears. There are few who have not at some time in their lives nursed a dream which was to them as dear as life itself, but which shrank from the least touch of reality, like the leaf of a sensitive plant. A dream like this thrives so long as we keep it screened from the intrusions of common life, and no longer. Mercy had thought of being Penruddocke's wife. She had peopled her nights and days with pictures of those fairy times to come when toil and care should be over, and she should be

his, and he should be hers for ever. Cruelly —cruelly the words of Miss Crow broke up all these fine fancies. Cruelly they let every day light in upon her visions. Mercy was only a poor schoolmistress, of humble rank and unknown birth. Penruddocke was a brilliant young man, well-born, with admiring friends around him, and the prospect of a wealthy and distinguished future. Yet this was the man whom she had hoped to call her husband. Foolish little Mercy! she saw it all now; and as with slow feet she went down the avenue and walked along the gloomy evening road she cried very bitterly indeed.

The road dipped down in a steep descent, and tall trees overshadowed it, making it dark and quiet. Mercy thought that here she could cry more freely, for none, she supposed, was at hand to hear or to see. But as she gave way to her sorrow she heard a step behind

her, and in a moment an arm was put round her waist, and a voice she well knew—a voice that was welcome still—spoke to her.

'Mercy, my little charmer,' cried Penruddocke, for it was he, 'what has happened?'

Mercy said nothing. Never again, she thought, would she have the chance of crying in his arms, and so she put her head upon his breast and let her grief flow. Penruddocke was dressed for the evening, and over his black clothes he wore a light surtout; but it had fallen open, and all the glory of his spotless shirt lay exposed. It was a fine shirt, and three diamond studs sparkled down its front, and it was very white and faultless, and creaseless, and Mercy laid her cheek against it. Penruddocke gently raised her drooping head and drew his coat between, so that her tears might not soil his shirt-front, and then

he pressed her to his heart, and begged her again to tell him what was the matter.

'Oh, Pen!' cried Mercy, when she could speak, 'we have been so foolish; only I never saw it until to-night.'

'And what has happened to-night?' Penruddocke asked.

'Miss Crow has been talking to me about you and your aunt Diana, and she says that your aunt has chosen a wife for you. Oh, Pen, how silly we have been!'

'A wife for me!' exclaimed Penruddocke.

'So Miss Crow says, and she knows all about your aunt. And Miss Crow declares,' continued Mercy, anxious to tell the worst, 'that if you disobeyed your aunt she would disinherit you, and you would be a beggar.'

Penruddocke looked very grave and said nothing; and Mercy stole a timid glance at his face.

'I know how it must be, Pen,' she said. 'We must say good-bye and forget the past.'

'And what will you do, Mercy?' he asked.

'I will live to myself, and work on at my teaching,' she replied. 'I will live on memory—and on hope. The world does not last for ever, Pen, and I shall think that when it is over we may meet and love each other in heaven. I could never forget you, Pen, nor love anybody else.'

The place was sequestered, and no one was near. Penruddocke caught the beautiful girl in his arms and kissed her with a passion which for the moment at least was almost as self-forgetting as her own.

'Mercy,' he whispered, 'I am like you: I shall never love another—never.'

Mercy had consigned her lover to the other world, it is true, but for all that at this assurance she nestled a little closer to him,

and pressed his hand. To be sure she might have been only thinking that, if he kept true to her, the sharpest sting of the sorrow would be already drawn, and they could love each other in secret and apart, until the weary years were gone by and they met in a place where tears and parting are no more. Mercy was a very simple girl, and carried her religion into her love-making.

Somehow things grew a bit brighter as she and her lover talked together. They were not parted yet, and Penruddocke protested that he would never give her up. He would sacrifice his aunt's favour and fortune first. At this Mercy looked up with a smile that lightened her tears as a sunbeam lightens an April shower.

'You could not endure poverty, Pen?' she murmured, gazing at him with a woman's fond credulity.

'For you, darling,' he cried, 'I could endure anything.'

And Mercy believed him, and was half-persuaded to be happy again. Poverty to her meant nothing; and how could she compute what it would mean to the man at her side? She was only a woman, born to love and to trust.

'All will be right at last,' said the brave, manly Pen.

'You think so, dear?' replied Mercy.

'I am sure of it,' he answered.

And so they bid each other good-bye. The dark clouds which had been frowning over Mercy's future rolled away again, and she could echo the peaceful evening song which she heard a bird singing close by. A deeper music than that sounded in her ear, for she remembered the Psalm which she had been explaining to the elder children

that evening, and the words seemed framed for herself: 'O taste and see how gracious the Lord is, blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.' She chose the words for the song of her own grateful lightened heart, and went her way full of hope and trust.

Meanwhile Penruddocke pursued his course, reflecting on what he had just heard. The matter, he well knew, was more serious than he had confessed it to be.

'Have I been foolish after all, entangling myself with this girl?' he said, as he walked slowly forward. 'If my aunt were to insist upon my obedience, I suppose I must give Mercy up.'

The contrast between the lovers is an ungracious one. But is it anything else than a picture of what has been going on between man and woman ever since the grand art of love began?

CHAPTER XI.

ANOTHER LOVER.

PENRUDDOCKE was on his way to dine with the vicar of Uphill, his father's friend, and now his own. The vicar had just secured a new curate; and being highly gratified with his prize, resolved to celebrate the capture, and also introduce the newcomer to his leading parishioners by giving a dinner party. To this parochial feast he invited Penruddocke, because he wished his new curate to form some suitable friendships with men of his own age, and Penruddocke appeared one of the most likely to answer the purpose. Penruddocke accepted the invitation readily,

for he liked the vicar; and he had more than once tasted the produce of his kitchen and his cellar, and liked these too.

The vicar of Uphill was a fair sample of a country clergyman. He had been well educated at a public school, and had not lost any serious amount of his knowledge in his passage through college. He was tolerably learned, tolerably clever, and tolerably good, but not excessively anything. For five-and-twenty years he had ministered in the same parish, and had, in addition to his sacred duties, managed schools, established soup kitchens, made petty wills, and acted as adviser-general to his flock. He was respected, and even feared, for he had a vigorous carriage and a commanding voice, and his will was as strong as iron. In spiritual things he was looked up to, and with reason, for his life was exemplary; but for all

that no one loved him. Some said he was a good man on a committee, and others praised his energetic and orthodox sermons: take him all round, people said, he was a very worthy man, and this was a fair estimate of him.

The vicarage was a cosy one, nestling in the arms of fine old trees, and surrounded by a well-shaven lawn, which was variegated by beds of flowers. Everything was well cared for, and scarcely a twig fell to the ground unseen by the gardener's watchful eye; and when you crossed the threshold you saw a pair of glass doors dividing the entrance hall into two parts, and giving you as they rolled back on their smooth hinges a hint of comfort and luxury inside. This hint was not a vain one. Go where you would in the vicarage, dining-room, drawing-room, library, bedrooms, still the carpets were always soft

and the furniture elegant; everything was in its place, and the house was always cool in summer and warm in winter. Unto the parson of Uphill the lines had fallen in pleasant places, and of the goodliness of his heritage many a poor curate or lean vicar thought with a sigh. But he too had paid his price for the comforts he enjoyed. He had never married. For the sweet vicissitudes of domestic life he must have paid a higher price than he cared to give. Pin-money to the wife, accomplishments to the daughters, and education for the sons were not compatible, as he well knew, with the sumptuous ease he loved. So he early made the choice of single life, and did not appear to regret the decision on the whole; though sometimes, as he looked down his dinner-table, he was heard to say that all his plate—he was a fancier of old silver—would go to the hammer at his death,

while he would add, smothering a sigh, 'My neighbour in the next parish has twelve children, and not half-a-dozen silver spoons in the world.'

Such a dinner-table as his, on a summer evening, with windows opening on a pretty garden, is as agreeable an object of social life as can be seen. The vicar had gathered a pleasant little party together; and do men ever sit down on so good terms with their neighbours as when the first whiff of a good dinner is in their nostrils? It was a clerical party; and Penruddocke, who had little idea of country clergymen beyond the conventional one, sat down prepared to accommodate himself as well as he could to their ecclesiastical and Tory talk. He thought, to be sure, that he might hear some good opinions on port wine. To his great surprise the conversation turned on flowers and fruit, with

occasional excursions into such subjects as fishing or the habits of birds. The talk, if perhaps a trifle mild, was refined and intelligent, and almost wholly unprofessional. Penruddocke, with his free-thought education, believed that when rural clergy dined together they were vinous and noisy and bigoted, and would discuss the feasibility of adding a few additional damnatory clauses to the Athanasian Creed. This assembly of quiet genial men, who were neither educated up to the offensive point nor, on the other hand, insensible to culture, surprised him greatly. Penruddocke's mind was open to conviction; indeed, his whole character was open to influence—fatally open; and now, under the action of this present experience of life, he began to ask himself whether the clergy might not be more rational beings than he had been taught to consider them.

'These are certainly gentlemen,' said Penruddocke to himself. Penruddocke was very fond of the words 'gentleman' and 'gentlemanly.'

Dinner had now proceeded a good way, when the vicar called out from his end of the table :

'Penruddocke, have I introduced my new curate to you?'

Penruddocke answered 'No,' upon which the vicar, with a little nod, pointed out a young man who sat opposite, and calling him by the name of Molton, went through an easy and good-natured form of introduction. The two young men exchanged bows, and Penruddocke began to take notes of his new acquaintance.

He was a tall young man, with light brown hair and features of remarkable fineness and beautiful proportion. The only part of his

face which was not symmetrical was his forehead, where on one side the hair grew much lower down than upon the other. This defect recompensed itself in a curious way, by giving to the whole face a certain air of manly negligence which agreeably relieved the somewhat feminine cast of the features. The eyes were grey, and so clear and steady in their aspect that in a moment one felt the owner must be a true man; and when he rose from his seat he discovered a frame so lithe and sinewy that, in spite of his graceful carriage, none would have thought of the dancing-master as the author of his easy movements. His dress was well-fitted and well-worn, and his white hands were in strong contrast with those of Penruddocke; for Molton did not wear rings, while on one of Penruddocke's fingers a costly diamond sparkled, and on the other a signet-ring; but

the hands were large and coarse. Indeed, the contrast between the two young men ran on the same lines throughout. Penruddocke looked like one who takes immense pains to be in all things and before everything a gentleman—nothing if not a gentleman; while Molton gave one the idea of being no more anxious about his manners than about his respiration or the beating of his heart. Perhaps a rustic young woman, who had not seen much of the world, would have said that Penruddocke was by far the finer gentleman of the two.

The young men, released from the graver conversation of their elders, began to talk together; and Penruddocke, with his perpetual feeling after gentility, remarked something about his new acquaintance—even in his very repose and modesty—which struck him as a sign of high breeding. This was enough for

Penruddocke. He resolved to cultivate the friendship forthwith.

Scarcely had the dessert been set on the table when the vicar, looking out upon his lawn, where now the setting sun threw its latest rays, proposed to his guests that they should drink their wine out of doors. The idea was welcomed, and in a few minutes the whole party were enjoying a delightful lounge, enlivened by the easiest of chat and the coolest of wines.

The decanters and glasses stood on a table, and the white cloth with the glasses sparkling ruby or topaz showed off to perfection on the green grass. One guest would be seen walking and talking with his hands gravely clasped behind his back, while the companion at his side would perhaps be enforcing his argument by a gentle wave of his half-emptied glass of port. Any argu-

ment must have been gentle in such a scene, with air so balmy, and wines so cool and mild, and such a stillness and loveliness all around.

The two young men sought out a seat under a spreading cedar tree, and continued their conversation; and Penruddocke, who was not much used to talking with clergymen on equal terms, tried his best to be agreeable. Indeed, the task was not difficult, for nothing could be easier or more unconventional than the manners of his new friend.

Now it happened that a little private path ran through that part of the garden, leading from the churchyard to the school buildings; and as Penruddocke and the curate sat here Mercy Travis, little expecting to see her lover, went by on her way to an evening class. She glanced up, observing that strangers were at hand, and when she

saw Penruddocke the swiftest scarlet ran over her face and betrayed her confusion. She hurried by, giving him so slight a nod of recognition that Molton amidst his confusion did not notice it at all. But he watched her figure as she passed with unconcealed admiration.

'What a very beautiful girl!' he exclaimed, as if the sight had taken his breath.

'She is handsome,' said Penruddocke, not quite at his ease.

'Handsome is not the word,' replied Molton. 'I should say, if it were not profane, angelic. I never saw such a face before.'

'You seem susceptible,' Penruddocke said, with an air of affected fun and actual embarrassment which must have aroused the suspicion of Molton had he not been quite preoccupied.

'Who can the girl be?' continued the curate, gazing at the empty air where she had vanished out of sight.

'That girl,' exclaimed the vicar, who had come unseen to their sides. 'She is my infant schoolmistress, Molton. The sweetest and best young woman I know.'

'She must be,' murmured Molton in a low voice. The vicar did not hear him, but Penruddocke heard and noted both his words and his manner.

'An upright, innocent, and lofty-minded girl,' pursued the vicar, saying each word slowly, and shaking his head emphatically. 'I don't know what we should do without her.'

'She is not leaving, is she?' Molton asked hastily.

'Certainly not,' answered the vicar. 'We shall go down to the school in the morning

and you shall see what a mistress she is, and what a model school she keeps.'

Molton made no reply, but he rose from his seat like a man who sought some outlet for strong emotion. The colour on his cheek was heightened, and there was a new light in his eyes. Penruddocke saw all. Mercy Travis had another lover.

CHAPTER XII.

PENRUDDOCKE.

WHAT sort of a young man was this Penruddocke? We know his good fortune, and how he had not only won the heart of a sweet and innocent girl, whose soul was as beautiful as her body, but had also secured to himself the admiration of a clever and wealthy old woman. What was the world's estimate of Penruddocke? Solitary opinions on character are of uncertain value, and even the verdict of two or three particular friends may be a mistaken one; but the world is never wrong. What did the world say of Penruddocke?

He was handsome. That was settled, because the women said so ; and when women decide that a man is handsome, everybody else may hold their peace. Penruddocke had high, and it might have been thought ungainly shoulders ; his flowing auburn hair had that peculiar shiny gloss which is seen at its perfection in the assistants of a fashionable hairdresser—a little less lustre would have been tolerable. He was tall and strongly built, though perhaps he looked more robust than he actually was. He stooped a little, for he had been a close reader ; and his walk was not elegant, for he had never been addicted to those athletic sports which give ease and forces a man's bearing. He dressed showily, and was fond of many colours, and the number of delicate-tinted kid-gloves that he spoiled in a week must have been considerable. He liked jewellery too, and had

several changes of rings and scarf-pins, and his watch-guard was a kind of curiosity shop, with its cluster of coins and trinkets. Such was the exterior of Penruddocke Bolton, who was called, as has been said, by all the women a handsome man.

A man who knew the world well has left it upon record that his experience led him to believe, that it takes three generations to make a gentleman. The Bolton family were respectable, but a single generation only divided them from an ancestry which was vulgar outside, and inside too. Indeed, it had been said many years ago that Death was the only gentleman in the family; and Death's mother, it must be remembered, was highly-born, and made a descent in life when she married Robert Bolton. The second Mrs. Bolton was a gracious smiling sort of woman, but her birth was plainer than most of her

latter-day friends supposed, and she was not capable of imparting to her offspring, either by inheritance or by education, that particular instinct which, unless in the rarest cases, is never found except among those who have been brought up in good society. Penruddocke had exactly that habit of mind which we so often observe in that fast-increasing class of young men who, being the sons of plain but moneyed parents, are sent to the university to be made gentlemen. He had all the toadying fondness for good society, all the nervous anxiety as to how his social superiors treated him, whether with complaisance or reserve, which fatally marks the man who is uneasy about his standing in society. If Penruddocke happened to meet a baronet or a peer in company, he would treat the great man with an excess of civility which, even while it flattered the potentate, told him

that the sycophant was of vulgar blood. Pen would listen obtrusively to the aristocratic talk, and show an ostentatious disregard of what the untitled folk around the table were saying. 'Nothing,' so Pen declared, 'showed your good breeding so plainly as your readiness to give honour where honour was due.' On the other hand, if he had any acquaintance who was on the outskirts of society Pen was haughty to such an one, and would say that for his part he never cut anybody, but that you must make a distinction between those whom it was proper to keep at arm's length and those whom you might take to your bosom. And these high and mighty remarks this young man often levelled at persons who were far better born than himself.

In his intellectual habit there was a remarkable parallel to his social servility. He was a clever and well-read young man,

quite able to think for himself, but this possibility of independence was never realised. Penruddocke was always asking what the leading authorities said on any question, and what he would say until another leading authority came out with something different. The cool, incisive philosophy of Detmar had far more mental energy than the wavering opinions of his pupil; but competent judges prophesied great things of young Bolton. He was liberal in his notions, they said, thoroughly well-read, and at the same time humane, and not wildly destructive.

Indeed, any description of him which was wholly detracting would be unjust. Penruddocke had cultivated tastes and high sympathies, and when his education is taken into account, he was surprisingly reverent. He had kindliness in his disposition too, and a certain breadth of nature which enabled him

without any affectation to sympathise with forms of thought and belief in which he himself put no faith. This was a character far superior to that of the sneering Detmar, who was indeed morally a detestable creature, and even intellectually more insignificant than his university friends, with their academic estimates, believed. Penruddocke had in a word a great deal of incipient goodness in him, and the question now was how he would turn out under the developing action of life. He had in him the elements of a noble man and the elements of a man anything but noble. So have most of us. To complicate the problem, Pen had a vast amount of that disguised vulgarity which, in seeking to escape from itself, plunges into deeper vulgarity. Yet, on the whole, he was a man of aspiration: he wanted to rise, and not to sink and wallow.

His love for Mercy Travis came like a

pure stream into the doubtful currents of his life. Of course heroines are expected to be paragons. But it was the testimony of everyone who knew this girl that she left upon them the impression of a nature sweet and true in a very extraordinary degree. Of course she had the pretty little vanities of her sex, and would rather be admired than not admired ; and she would flirt a little bit in her village way when she had the chance. But in all the weightier matters of the law, so to speak, Mercy was a being of exalted principle. She loved with her whole soul, and would no more have thought of being seriously untrue to Penruddocke than of committing theft. And she was modest, as all really good women are; not on the surface, but in the depths of her soul, and was far too innocent to be prudish. Besides, her form was ripe and womanly, as well as beautiful : Mercy was no

statue, no painter's beauty ; indeed, in looking at her the sight of her awakened love rather than admiration. And her character carried forward the conquest which her appearance commenced, for what can be more delightful than to love a woman for her face and form, and then find these only the symbols of a beautiful nature ? Within the frame of Venus we often find paltriness and self-conceit, and deformity of soul. Mercy did not disappoint her admirers : she was a genuine woman, and all the softness, and fineness, and tenderness of which feminine beauty is the material sign was to be found in her invisible nature.

Accordingly she was just the person to captivate Penruddocke, and she did captivate him. For the first three months after he knew her he was deeply in love, and during that time his character and his views of life grew stronger and higher ; and he threw off to

a remarkable extent the bad influence of Detmar. But within the past three weeks a rival to Mercy had arisen. This was an Irish heiress who had come to spend a month in Warcaster, and had met Penruddocke. Miss O'Connor was a tall girl, with a fine figure, a stylish face, and a profusion of yellow hair. She was, like many of her countrywomen, vivacious and handsome, and, like a lucky few of them, enormously rich. She was well-connected, and, like most Irish people, delighted in letting you know it. She could trace her lineage through an extinct dukedom; she had flirted with earls, jilted one poor peer, and had all the hungry squireens of Tipperary dying for her and her unheard-of fortune. She met Penruddocke and liked him. As to marrying him, with her preposterous Irish pride she was as likely to have married her footman, but she thought

him amusing, and was willing that for a time he should be an amusement to her. Penruddocke, forgetting Mercy, and dazzled by Miss O'Connor's brilliant talk, and more dazzled by his own wild hopes, launched out upon a desperate flirtation. Innocent little Mercy, with her faithful heart, had never since Pen first kissed her spoken a word or thought a thought which was not tuned to the note of perfect constancy. He never could have found her at any time playing coquette, though she was far too pretty not to be often tempted. Her love was to her a hallowed thing, for which in her artless way she thanked God in her prayers before she went to sleep. But as for Pen, during the three weeks when he flirted with Miss O'Connor he was often ready to forget not Mercy alone, but himself and honour too. He had this much good in him, that many days he would not go to see

Mercy, for her love and honesty were too reproachful to his conscience. The O'Connor illusion ended as any worldly-wise man would have foretold. At the end of a particular week a wealthy baronet came to Warcaster. This personage, it turned out, was for Miss O'Connor the man of men. Indeed, it was declared afterwards that they had been engaged for a whole month before that lively young heiress came to Warcaster herself. Be that as it may, one morning Penruddocke beheld the rich beauty riding down the street in company with a stranger, and he saw by one of her glances that she had perceived him. Where women were concerned Pen had no small supply of easy and untroubled self-conceit. It never struck him who the stranger might be. He advanced confidently, prepared to salute the lady, and not doubting but he should have a gracious

smile. Alas! the merciless Irishwoman never looked at him again, but rode slowly by, brushing him with her horse's tail, and laughing a silvery laugh at some jest of her companion. That night Pen loved Mercy again, and was very penitent and constant and affectionate, and generally romantic and virtuous.

This was the young man to whom sweet Mercy Travis had given her heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

HIS DILEMMA.

The correspondence which had been kept up between Diana Bolton and her nephew for several years was still maintained, though its form was a little modified. As the aunt perceived that the time was at hand when Penruddocke would have to act for himself, she began to press upon him with extraordinary assiduity the necessity of living for a purpose. The young man's habits were expensive, and, as has been remarked, there was a flashiness about his manner which laid him open to the suspicion of extravagance even when he was not guilty. He talked

about horses; became a member of half-a-dozen clubs; either knew the leading pretty actresses in London or talked as if he knew them; and in a general way put on the style of a semi-fast man. Rumours of all this must, Pen guessed, have come to the ears of Miss Crow, and she again must have transmitted the reports to her friend Diana, for he noticed a change in the tone of his aunt's letters. As if to anticipate the career upon which he had entered, and forestall his own thoughts, Miss Bolton remarked many times in her letters that it was well for young men to take their fling for a few months upon their entry into life. She added that even grocers knew the philosophy of such a course, for she had heard that when these tradesmen engaged a juvenile assistant it was their custom to allow him for three days to eat as much of the sweet-goods as he liked; and

at the end of that time the disciple was so sick of all sugared meat that he might for evermore be trusted with candied fruits and preserves. Pen winced under this sarcasm, but he consoled himself by the reflection that his aunt might easily have taken a much more disagreeable view of his manner of life.

Indeed, signs were not wanting of the near approach of a day when his aunt would demand a return for all her bounty. She began to speak of the work of life, and hinted pretty plainly that his hours both of learning and play were running out. Work, work, work, was her constant theme. We were not sent into the world to enjoy or amuse ourselves, but to overthrow tyrannies and to beat down falsehoods. Reforms had to be accomplished, and abuses had to be swept away. To these tasks he was to gird him-

self. There is no occasion to swell a story by repetition of moral maxims which the imagination of every reader will supply, but it must be said that Diana wrote with an earnestness which clearly showed that her heart was in her exhortation, and that her ideas of life, however stern and unbending, were of the heroical kind. She reminded him over and over again of the shortness of human existence, and the certainty that there was no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave. Miss Bolton was very fond of the Book of Ecclesiastes, and often advised her nephew to study it, except the last two verses, which she cautioned him were an impudent addition by some brain sick Jew.

'There is a small hill outside the city,' she remarked in one letter, 'and here I very often climb up, and watch the course of the

Seine. I see the river pursuing its stately way through rich fields and by pleasant homes. Here I like to sit and meditate, and here, day by day, amidst the light and the gladness and the free sunshine, there comes to me the feeling that all will soon be over. Preachers say that it is in the darkness and silence of night we realise the brevity and uncertainty of life: I realise it most in the open daylight, when the world is looking brightest, and men are busiest. We have been mysteriously placed in an inexplicable world. You and I have a thousand comforts and advantages which are denied to our less fortunate fellow-creatures. Let us be grateful, and be good and do good, while we can, for the time is short, and always getting shorter.'

At this point Penruddocke laid the letter down.

'If the time is so short, and the extinction so total,' he said to himself, 'what the deuce does she make all this moral fuss for.'

And he took up 'The Era,' which was on the table beside him, and resumed the reading which his aunt's letter had interrupted. He had a turn for speculation himself, but somehow as time went on he began to prefer a newspaper and a glass of bitter beer to all the philosophies; which in truth he began to find a little tedious, and not much less unsatisfactory than theology itself.

His aunt wrote a great deal about her friend Miss Crow. She especially directed Penruddocke to describe in every letter the state of the old lady's health, but he was not to inquire after it, for this Miss Crow greatly disliked. 'You must excuse her excessive partiality for me,' Diana observed; 'she has no friend in the world, and she idolises me.

You will by your own good sense discount her affectionate but absurd panegyrics upon your aunt. I can tell you, however, the old lady admires you excessively; and though I would not insinuate any unworthy motive, still, as she is wealthy and has no relatives living, her admiration is not to be lightly esteemed. But, indeed,' Diana added, 'I love her, and I want you to love her too.'

Penruddocke took the hint. He visited Miss Crow with frequency and constancy, and never excused himself from accepting any of her invitations to *tête-à-tête* dinner, and by these means he made rapid advances in the good graces of the old lady. The elder Bolton had for some months suffered from a commencing blindness, which had lately become much worse, so that he was unable to enter into society with ease or enjoyment. Upon the occasion of her first and only visit

to his house Miss Crow saw him ; but he was very blind, and very ill-tempered, and she did not appear to care for a more intimate acquaintance. Certainly she never included him in any of her invitations : once only she remarked that Mr. Bolton, if asked, would of course not be able to come, and from that time she never mentioned his name. But upon Penruddocke she heaped attentions. No dish was too costly, no wine was too choice, for those little banquets when she and he met and he ate and drank, and she talked, and each time she seemed to find his society more charming. It was not hard to be agreeable over such cookery, and under the influence of such wine.

At last, upon a fatal day, he received a letter from his aunt, announcing that the time had come when he ought to get married, and that she had chosen a wife for him.

This intelligence reached him just a week after Mercy had told him of his aunt's intention, as reported by Miss Crow. Of course Penruddocke was greatly disturbed. Not alone was he threatened with the loss of Mercy, to whom he was really attached, but what was more serious, the prospect of having to marry an unknown person, who might possibly be offensive to him, was now full in view. Penruddocke was not much in the habit of consulting his father, but in this particular difficulty he judged it prudent to secure his good-will, if possible; and, as a means to that end, he decided to ask his advice. He found his father sitting in the library, gloomily waiting for his servant, who read the newspaper to him every morning. Penruddocke stated his case in the most forcible language he could command, expatiating on the hardship of being compelled to

marry a woman whose very name he did not yet know, and who might be, for anything he could tell, old, and a fright, and a horror every way. Of Mercy Travis, we may be sure, he said not a word.

'I am sorry for you, Pen,' said Bolton senior, when his son's story had been told. 'But it cannot be helped. You are to inherit a large fortune, and you must do something to earn it. After all, it is easier making the money in this way than going out to India for forty years, and coming home without your liver to eke out the remainder of your life when all the pleasure of living is over. Take a commercial view of the transaction.'

'Suppose I write to her, and say I will not consent to her proposal?' said Pen, in a threatening tone.

Hercules Bolton had been sitting with his head hanging in a dejected way, as he vainly

tried to explore the carpet-pattern. When Penruddocke made this last remark he raised his useless eyes, instinctively expecting to see his son's face.

'Do you know that I am almost wholly dependent on your aunt?' he asked. 'Dependent on her from quarter to quarter?'

'I suspected it,' Pen replied uneasily.

'Do you know why your grandfather disinherited me?' pursued the elder.

Penruddocke said he had never heard.

'Because,' Hercules continued, 'I would not marry the woman my sister Diana wished. After my father's death Diana offered to restore the property, if I would obey her. I refused. The woman was old, and a fright, and a horror every way, as you say. I married your mother, who was the most dashing girl of her time, and Diana cast me off. I made a bad choice. I wish

now that I had married as Diana proposed.'

Hercules was now over fifty, but he was the same pompous, grumbling, egotistical man he had been in youth, and would blame anybody for his failures in life, except himself.

'Yes,' he went on, sulkily drooping his head again, 'your mother was my ruin.'

'Had she not a fortune?' demanded Pen, who did not like to hear his mother so spoken of.

'Fortune!' the father repeated, shrugging his shoulders, 'yes, she had a fortune; but it was badly invested, and when I was trying to put it out in solid securities the whole went to the bad. No, I should have married as Diana wished, and I should have been a rich man to-day—and independent—independent.' He shook his head moodily.

'I am afraid I cannot take your view of things,' said the son. 'I should like to see my way in marriage.'

'Your way is pretty plain,' cried Hercules, growing animated. 'One turning leads to beggary, and the other to fortune. Take which you like: only remember, I shall write to your aunt, and tell her you are acting against my wishes. That shall be made clear to her. I am not going to be beggared for any folly of yours.'

'But why will not my aunt allow me to remain unmarried?' asked Penruddocke, in a quieter voice.

'Perhaps she has some one to whom she wishes to marry you,' replied Hercules impatiently. 'More likely because she has made up her mind that you shall obey her absolutely in the most important act of your life. You don't know your aunt. Child, girl,

woman, she has always been the same—her passion is to govern others. If she should choose to send you to keep the Eddystone lighthouse, and you were to refuse, she would treat you more severely than I should treat you for contradicting me. Be thankful she has imposed no heavier task on you than this. You may like your wife, and if you don't, why you are no worse off than nine out of ten of all the married men I know. And you will have this consolation, that you did not make a fool of yourself by an unwise choice, as other men do. Besides, if your wife is disagreeable, you can treat her as a housekeeper, and see little of her. It is astonishing what can be done by a little arrangement.'

'Well,' said Penruddocke, drawing a long breath, 'I shall try to make my aunt change her mind.'

'If you do not take care she *will* change

it,' replied the father; 'and if in one moment of passion she makes a vow to disinherit you, a shilling of her money you will never touch. Mind what you are about, Pen, and remember that love lasts a month, and money a lifetime, if you have sense to keep it. All I say is, do nothing rash: you have a dangerous temper to deal with.'

'Then you think, upon the whole,' said Penruddocke, who seemed to feel the force of his father's words, 'that I shall have to obey my aunt?'

'Of course you will,' the father answered, with a slight show of returning good-humour. 'You are not the man to blast your own prospects. Dear me, where is that fellow? Do ring; I am bored to death waiting for him.'

And in this way Hercules, who was half-angry and half-frightened, managed to put an end to the discussion. He had sense enough

to see that his wisest course was to allow what he had said to sink quietly into his son's mind, without farther dispute.

In his calculations on the eventualities of human life and character, Hercules was accustomed to make liberal allowance for the action of self-interest; and he felt pretty sure that his son would, in the long run, elect to obey Diana and secure her fortune. He had never seen in Penruddocke any sign of that fatal heroism which will surrender the good things of this life for the sake of sentiment.

CHAPTER XIV.

HIS DILEMMA RESOLVED.

In the main, perhaps, Hercules was not far wrong, but whatever might be Penruddocke's intention as to what he should do if his aunt persisted in her resolution, he felt by no means disposed to submit to a marriage of this sort without making any effort to avert it. He revolved the possibilities of escape which were open to him, and at last bethought him of Miss Crow. She was his friend. He would go boldly to her, and beg her to mediate with his aunt, so as at least to give him time, if the requirement could not be altogether abandoned. The more he thought

over this plan the more hopeful it seemed, and he went out to his old friend full of resolution and confidence.

Miss Crow, sitting on one of her minikin couches, with bowed head, and eyes fixed immovably on one spot in the carpet, heard the whole story and argument of her young friend with grave attention. Her lips were compressed ; she frowned heavily ; and, though she did not seem actually angry, she might have been preparing herself for some displeasing announcement. Pen, however, was careful to suppress everything that could in the remotest way suggest the idea of any rebellion against his aunt's authority : he was ready to submit, he declared, but he hoped, nay, he believed, that after hearing his objections, his aunt would withdraw her requirement.

'Have you quite done?' asked Miss

Crow, when at last he paused. 'Have you anything more to say?'

'No,' said Penruddocke, 'that is my case, as the lawyers say.'

'Do you want me to say what I really think?' Miss Crow asked, straining her bowed head upward to get a look at his face.

'There is nothing I should desire so much,' answered he.

'Then,' said Miss Crow, 'you must do what your aunt wishes.'

'But remember,' pleaded Pen, thinking that he ought to repeat the more forcible parts of his argument, which might have slipped the old lady's mind, 'remember what I said——'

'I remember everything,' said Miss Crow decisively. 'Your aunt wishes you to marry, and you must marry.'

'Granting that,' Penruddocke replied,

'might I not choose a wife for myself, subject, of course, to my aunt's approval?'

'I have answered you before,' said Miss Crow inexorably. 'I told you that you must do what your aunt wishes. She not only wishes you to marry, but to marry one whom she has chosen. You have no choice. Your aunt must be obeyed.'

'Then,' said Penruddocke, with a very blank look, 'you will not mediate with my aunt for me?'

'I shall let your aunt know what you have said,' answered Miss Crow. 'She will not change her mind. I have no doubt she has anticipated all your objections, and before her resolution they will avail just as much as blades of grass before the scythe which mows them down.'

'In that case,' said Penruddocke, rising, and not succeeding very brilliantly in his

attempt to conceal his vexation, 'I may as well wish you good morning. I am obliged to you for listening to me so patiently.'

'Remember this,' said Miss Crow, as she took his hand, 'your aunt knows what is good for you. You could not make her a more handsome return for the favour she has shown to you, than by trusting to her judgment in this matter. But, however you may act or think, she will not be moved. Your father disobeyed her under similar circumstances, and lived to repent his obstinacy bitterly; not alone for the pecuniary punishment with which his sister most justly visited him, but also on account of his own unfortunate choice. He married a hateful woman.'

'Really,' said Penruddocke, dropping her hand quickly, 'you must let me say that you are speaking of my mother.'

'What if I am?' cried Miss Crow, break-

ing out into a fury which quite startled him. 'What if I am? She was a hateful woman—a hateful woman. What matter if she was your mother? That was no fault of yours, and it extenuates no fault of hers. I tell you, she was a hateful woman!'

The old lady's face had all at once assumed a horrible expression, and her twisted body writhed with her fury.

'Surely my mother never injured you!' said Penruddocke, in whom wonder for the moment overpowered indignation.

'Of course not,' replied Miss Crow, cooling down a little. 'She could not have injured me, for I never saw her, but she blasted the life of Diana, whom I love above all things—the noblest of women,' added she after a pause, shaking her head, and speaking with emphasis and deliberation.

Penruddocke had no wish to pursue the

subject ; and as Miss Crow on her part seemed anxious to retreat from it, no more was said, and they parted with tolerable civility, but with no cordiality.

Penruddocke was, in fact, very angry at the language which Miss Crow had used when speaking of his mother ; and his resentment not having found vent in the way that seemed most natural, passed into the form of resistance. Who—he asked himself—was Miss Crow, after all, that she should speak so positively about his aunt and her intentions ? He resolved to write himself to his aunt, at Rouen, and make an urgent appeal to her forbearance. So filled was he with a sense of the justice of his cause, that, in spite of his father and Miss Crow, he looked for a favourable answer. His letter was written judiciously, and in terms of respect and submission. He even said that he would obey

his aunt, if she insisted upon such a marriage; and having, as he thought, softened her mind by this declaration, he took the opportunity of adding immediately that he could not hide the fact from himself that he might be made miserable for life. He wrote, in fact, a sort of see-saw letter, now going to the extreme of submission and then to the extreme of repugnance. He closed, however, by repeating that under no circumstances would he act contrary to her wishes.

His aunt's reply did not reach him for more than a fortnight, and the prolonged silence inspired him with hopes. These did not survive long after he opened her letter. She dismissed the subject with incredible brevity. Of his reasonings and protestations she took not the slightest notice. 'I am glad to find,' said she, 'that you intend to obey me. If it had been otherwise, you would find

yourself, as you read this letter, a beggar, and unknown to me for evermore.' Penruddocke had written six sheets of appeal: the answer was three lines long.

He knew his fate. Mercy must be renounced. Objects of affection that are lost, or just about to be lost, always grow dearer; and Pen dropped his head on the table and thought what a sweet girl Mercy was. For a few moments he even fancied himself giving up wealth and the prospects of life for her; living in a cottage with her, and surrendering all beside.

'But,' he said to himself, 'where should I find enough to pay the rent of a cottage? And how should I feel in years to come with babies dropping in upon me, and nothing, or next to nothing, to live on? And Mercy might lose her beauty, or even, under the friction of care and poverty, turn shrew!'

Then Penruddocke thought of his clubs and his horses, and stalls at the theatre, and his dainty wines, and his fragrant cigars, and the faultless fitting of West-end tailors. It was enough.

'I shall go out this evening and break it to Mercy,' he said. 'She will have a few crying fits, and after that she will not feel it so acutely.'

CHAPTER XV.

PRUDENCE AND PASSION.

PENRUDDOCKE was very sorry to break poor Mercy's heart, but he felt it must be done, and the more he revolved the matter the plainer his path appeared. 'Even if she is grieved,' thought he, 'it is better that I should be wealthy, than that we should both be miserable all our lives long. Besides, I can make her a present. I can give her a sum which, to a girl in her position, will be a small fortune!' This was a bright idea, and greatly invigorated him. Now, he felt sure, he would have nerve to terminate the connection at once and for ever.

He overlooked in his calculation one particular force which had not yet been wholly discharged from the affair. The young girl was charming; he himself was insensible neither to the charms of character nor person; and the impression she had already made upon him was as deep as any of which his nature was capable. He had just been conversing with self-interest and prudence, and thought these potent pleaders quite irresistible; but beauty and passion had yet to speak, when Penruddocke was flattering himself that the controversy was ended.

He wrote one of his little notes to Mercy, asking her to meet him in a certain sequestered spot, where many a time he and she had made love. Thither he went late in the evening, uneasy in his mind, it is true, but fixed, he believed, in his purpose, and reassured by remembering his notable plan of

giving Mercy a compensation for his compelled unkindness.

He came upon her suddenly. Had she, with any innocent coquetry, disposed herself to weave around his heart anew the delicate spell which he had just torn off? She looked so sweet, so spotless, so fresh, that words could no more paint her than paint the flowers which were breathing perfume from the hedge-row where she stood. Indeed, she was a beautiful woman, untouched by art, fresh from her Maker's hand, and with no more of the artifices of her sex than that pleasure in being admired which is inborn in a woman, and which blushing Eve felt in Paradise when Adam's eyes met hers, for the first exchange of sight and love. Penruddocke looked at her, and prudence and self-interest, and the pleasures of wealthy life, went the way of the wind; and, in a kind of intoxica-

tion, he forgot all he was going to have said. He surrendered himself to the soft delirium of the hour, and although they said little to each other, because silence had become their deeper speech, there was a flow of tenderness between them that was deep and strong, with a few ripples of playfulness, which only discovered the depth of the feeling they sought to make light of. Penruddocke did not let fall a hint of what had been in his mind; he resolved afresh to marry Mercy. Somehow, he imagined, he would bring his aunt round to his way of thinking. He could not despair of anything just then, for love, though it can by no means remove mountains, will, in certain moments of exaltation, believe that it can. Penruddocke was like Balaam: he could not deliver his message, but must deliver what in that hour was given to him by a power mightier than

himself, or the golden promises of the world.

And so they parted, breathless with love and happiness; and Mercy would have died a thousand deaths for him, and he sincerely believed that he loved her with a true devotion.

On reaching home, and before the effervescence of feeling had passed off, he was told that his friend and late tutor Detmar was waiting for him. Penruddocke was glad to hear this: he must confide in somebody, and on the whole none better than Detmar was likely to be found; so he met his friend heartily.

Mr. Detmar had been taking a holiday. It was a maxim with the little man, that Paris was the finest city in the world, and Byron the greatest poet; and under the combined sway of the poet and the capital he had,

in three weeks, reduced himself to a state of prostration so profound that no amount of soda and brandy availed to restore him, while his meagre body seemed ready to shrink into a walnut-shell. He was not the least penitent, but he was beginning to entertain some doubts as to the fidelity of Don Juan as a guide, particularly in a life where people are created with nerves and other organs which will not sympathise altogether with free-will living, even when pursued under the guidance of a great poet, and by a pupil of modern philosophy. Detmar lay curled up on a sofa, looking the picture of an epicurean cynic, suffering from an excessive application of his own system. He had, indeed, to contend with other causes of depression than such as were purely physical. The Byronic method of life was not only exhausting to the frame, but to the pocket also; and though he was

already a debtor to his late pupil in the sum of two hundred pounds, he was now compelled to ask his friendly assistance again, being sorely pressed for money. The pecuniary difficulties of Detmar would be unworthy of notice, only that at this particular juncture they played an important part in this story. Penruddocke was about to open to his friend a project which would, if carried out, reduce him from the state of wealth to that of poverty. Meantime it was of great importance to Detmar that Penruddocke should not be thus reduced, a fact which fully accounts for the villainous suggestions made on this occasion.

Penruddocke, full of love for Mercy, told Detmar that at all hazards he would marry her, and brave his aunt's displeasure. Detmar replied at first with one of his cold sneers, but quickly finding that this was, on

the present occasion, ineffectual and imprudent, and having beside serious ends of his own in view, he adopted a graver tone, and actually sympathised with his young friend on the ardour of his passion. Penruddocke was delighted with this gush of humanity, and seized Detmar's hand warmly. The other, who was as subtle as any serpent, saw that he was on the right track.

'Still,' said he, 'however devotedly you love this girl, you must not marry her.'

'What do you mean?' cried Pen.

'Your aunt's fortune must not be sacrificed,' continued Detmar in a tone of quiet conviction. 'You must marry this girl, and not marry her.'

'I don't understand you,' cried Pen again.

'Have you ever read the "Vicar of Wakefield?"' inquired Detmar. 'Don't you remember the contrivance of Squire

Thornhill to secure Livy Primrose by a mock marriage, which would deceive the girl, and satisfy her scruples, but which would not bind him? Don't you think that, in these days of registry offices, we might, by a very simple contrivance, put you in possession of Miss Mercy.'

'Detmar!' cried Penruddocke, in a rage, 'this would be diabolical.' Detmar, knowing his man, took this reproach with the utmost good-temper.

'The girl is so innocent,' continued the indignant Penruddocke, 'and so friendless, that no one but a villain could take advantage of her.'

'If she were not inexperienced—or innocent, as you call it,' said Detmar coolly, 'and if she were not friendless, you could not manage the affair. Her ignorance of life, and the fact that she can be persuaded to trust

herself to you without consulting anybody, are the very facts upon which we must work.'

'I tell you, Detmar,' cried Penruddocke, 'this would be the plot of a devil, not of a man.'

'Let us see,' replied the other, quite unmoved by his friend's violence, 'if you marry her in this way you do not make what is called a sinner of her, for she will believe that she is your lawful wife. You can allege, as a pretext for keeping her in some remote place, that your aunt must remain in ignorance of the connection. Possibly you can persuade your aunt to allow you to continue single, in which case you can make Mercy your wife after your aunt's death. And even if you are forced to marry someone else, need Mercy ever know it? And if she did find it out, still she would be in your power; and a little

penitence on your part, coupled with a handsome provision, such as you could easily make for her, would set matters right. Now look at this picture: happiness for yourself and comfort for this girl on the one side, and on the other, beggary and misery for the pair of you, and say if any miserable women's nonsense about virtue should make you hesitate as to what should be done!'

The barest outline of this odious conversation is all that need be repeated. Detmar bore all Penruddocke's abuse with patience, and even welcomed his violence, knowing that so much resolution was expended in the utterance of each reproachful word. Meanwhile he ever crept nearer to his point, and showed that his plan was not imprudent, was not wrong, and even that it was generous and humane! Penruddocke's fury began to show signs of giving out.

'Even if the scheme were not detestable,' he said at last, 'it is impracticable. How could it ever be managed?' At which Detmar smiled to himself, and saw that his point was won.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CURATE IN LOVE.

UPHILL being a quiet and exclusive suburban parish, inhabited by a number of ladies who were wealthy and good, was just the place where the coming of a new curate is a genuine event. Whether he should turn out to be married or single, dark or fair, tall or short, stout or slim, were all contingencies which were earnestly discussed. After the appearance of Mr. Molton upon the scene, he was scanned, and studied, and chatted over with a diligence which was a fitting sequel to the interest which foreran his appearance. The parish was a composite one, both in the

ecclesiastical and the social sense, having a 'high' set and a 'low' set, a fashionable set and a sober set. Each set pronounced a separate judgment on the new curate. The high church people were quite certain that he was not 'low,' and the low church people got quite angry if anyone ventured to hint that he was 'high.' The fashionable people picked him out as likely to be the ornament of garden parties, and even had a hope that he might be induced to dance; while the sober ones declared that he had the ease, and refinement, and moderation of mind which used to be thought the mark of a typical English parson. Everybody fished for the curate, each with their own particular bait. Miss Gomery, the leading low churchwoman in the parish, met him in the street, and told him that she hoped he would distribute the Tract Society's productions, and not those of

the Christian Knowledge Society, which she pledged him her word had Romish leanings. Mrs. Skinner, on the other hand, whispered him at a party that by a little tact, she believed, he could wheedle the vicar into using 'Hymns Ancient and Modern' in the church. The Honourable Mrs. Broome, leaning back in her carriage, and laughing one of her great fat laughs, asked him if he would make one of her party to the races, giving her jovial word that he should not be asked to bet anything except gloves. The very same day old Mr. Jenkins, who had gone out to India before the period of church revival, and had little more idea of modern ecclesiastical life than if he had been a Hindoo, took young Molton by the hand and said warmly, 'Look after the poor here, if you can. Get them to be sober, and to keep their houses clean, and to come to church once a

Sunday. Never mind if they don't understand all they hear. Know 'em all by their names, Tom, and Bill, and Dick, and have a kind word to say to 'em as you pass 'em in the street; and whenever you want a bit o' lunch, drop into my little place at one o'clock and we shall see what can be done.'

None of all these, with the exception of old Jenkins, were altogether confident that the curate was the man they took him for. That he did not belong to the opposition party was clear—so each party said—but that he was their own could not so easily be decided. That he was agreeable in society everyone confessed, and his good looks were admitted with the same—or nearly the same—unanimity. His well-bred easy manners were greatly admired, and the artless, graceful reverence of his behaviour in church struck everybody. But neither in his talk nor in his

sermons would he commit himself to any extremes. He could handle a bat and an oar, rode to perfection, and would now and then go for a day's shooting. There was a charming worldliness about him which Miss Gomery reproved in her own mind, still tenderly believing that he would shake it off as he grew older and wiser; and at the same time there was an earnestness and a freshness in his way of saying the prayers which more than once brought tears to Mrs. Broome's worldly wandering eyes, and fixed them on the page before her. In a word, he was not quite good enough for the pious people, and too good for the careless ones; but they all liked him, and declared that he was a gentleman throughout.

One pair of eyes in the parish church were apt to meet those of the curate, and when this happened would glance off very

swiftly. How long does it take a woman to find out when she is admired? Is there such a portion of time as the millionth part of a second? If we could answer these questions, we might decide whether it had been possible for Mercy Travis to discover, as she ran past young Molton in the vicar's garden, and exchanged a glance with him more hasty far than her flying steps, that her beauty had struck him to the heart. However this may have been, there was ever afterwards a peculiar consciousness in her face when she met the curate, a restraint which told of secret thoughts. Nothing occurred for a long time afterwards to deepen any suspicions in Mercy's mind, for Molton rather shunned her, and never talked with her a moment beyond the time which was required for school matters. Still Mercy had seen once what she could not forget, and, free as

she was from coquetry and vanity, she believed that the curate admired her, although, as has been seen, her grounds for this conviction were, after the male judgment on such points, immeasurably small.

Of one thing she felt quite sure: he was not to be compared with Penruddocke—her Penruddocke! Where was the dashing air, the handsome style of dress, which had captivated her simple village soul at the first sight, and which even now seemed to her the very paragon of gentlemanly appearance and manner? That the curate was refined and graceful, in his way, Mercy could not deny, but she judged him to be quiet, almost to tameness: and beside, he was only a curate, and Mercy thought that a little of the layman's freedom from conventionality would not be disagreeable in a husband. Over and above all this, she had given her heart and

her word to Penruddocke, and was no longer her own mistress. So in her occasional musings upon the curate, Mercy kept herself to the simple point of guessing what she would have said to him, if he had asked her and she had been free. She could not exactly tell. Perhaps she might have liked him. But of one thing she was quite sure: in no way could he bear comparison with Penruddocke. Indeed, she had so made up her mind upon this point, that she went over and over the matter many times, and always came to the conclusion that she was perfectly certain that under no circumstances could she admire Molton as she admired Penruddocke. She felt relieved, in an odd sort of way, every time that she decided this afresh, though of course it could not be a subject of any real importance to her.

Meanwhile Molton himself found that, in

spite of every effort, and all the pleas and reasonings of prudence, he was each day falling, or sinking—for he had fallen already —more deeply in love. Something about Mercy conquered him beyond the power of resistance. She was only a schoolmistress, of lowly origin no doubt; she called him 'sir'; if he married her, he must endure the miserable humiliation of seeing his wife cut by all the ladies of a parish. All that he knew. But he loved her so passionately that for her sake he would resign all his English prospects. Why not go out as a missionary, and take her with him? He would leave pride of birth, and the insolence of wealth and station, behind him in Christian lands: the heathen would not snub his wife because she did not know her grandfather. The young curate thought over this project with glistening eyes, and he felt that Greenland's

icy mountains, or India's coral strand, with that lovely girl at his side, would be the garden of Eden to him.

But an obstacle lay in the way. This young man—as may have been surmised—was the son of that Molton who, in the earlier part of this story, appeared as the friend of Death Bolton. The elder Molton still lived, and as he had ever been the most considerate and tender of fathers, he had secured to himself inalienably the affection and reverence of his son. Young Molton well knew that if he left England his father, who was now a widower, and had no other child to comfort him, would be left desolate. The son accordingly came to a resolution which, if not romantic, was at least dutiful. He would resign all thoughts of Mercy—unless by any chance his father should approve of the connection—and he would throw up the curacy

of Uphill, for, indeed, the place was already becoming intolerable to him, from the constraint he had to put upon his feelings. He was thankful, however, that he had kept his secret so well, and that he had never spoken to Mercy about the love that had so often been beating and burning within him, as he stood by her side in the schoolroom.

Perhaps he would not have told his father anything of the matter, but would have made the sacrifice silently, only that he must explain his hasty flight from Uphill, more especially as the vicar was his father's friend. When, however, he had decided upon making the confession, he became conscious of a faint spark of hope within him that his father might not altogether or finally put an end to his hopes; and he was glad that, for other reasons than his private hopes and fears, he was forced to confide in him. Accordingly he

obtained leave of absence from his vicar, and went to see his father, who still lived in his ancestral home, close to the place where Death and Susan made their early love.

One morning, as the father and son were walking along the cliffs beside the sea, and looking at the waves, which, diminished by the height, rolled in noiseless foam up the pebbly beach, the young man, who until now had been unable to tell his secret, took the opportunity of making the disclosure.

'You have led me into temptation,' he said, forcing a smile, 'when you sent me to Uphill.'

'What do you mean?' inquired his father, looking sharply at him. He had observed his son's absent and melancholy manner, and guessed that he was in love.

'There is a schoolmistress there,' continued the son, 'called Miss Travis, the most

enchanting girl I ever saw. I have fallen in love with her—foolishly, madly, desperately.'

'Well,' said the father, 'tell me all about it.'

'I know that you will, that you must, disapprove of such a connection,' said the son, running on in feverish haste. 'I have resolved to end the matter. You have been the kindest of fathers to me ever since I can remember, and I shall never under the name of love do anything that would grieve you.'

The quiet, handsome face of Molton senior had lost none of its soft, delicate expression, or its capacity for expressing fine feeling. His hair was silver grey, and his look that of a man who has seen sorrow, and tempered it with patience and a noble habit of hope. He looked admiringly and fondly at his son, who caught his father's hand and wrung it convulsively, and for a little while both were silent.

'Harry,' said the father after this pause, 'you have made me more happy than I can tell.'

'That was what I meant to do,' the son replied with an inextinguishable sadness breaking out in his voice, as he tried to speak cheerfully.

'You don't understand me,' the other continued. 'It is the dearest wish of my heart that you should marry this girl.'

'What!' cried the son, fairly shouting out the word in his excitement.

'Sit down here,' said the father, laying his hand gently on his son's arm, 'and listen to me.'

They sat down on the dry grass upon the edge of the cliff, and as before the sea rolled softly up the beach, wave after wave, and now a waft of wind brought on its wings a few notes of the music which the waters made.

'Harry,' continued Molton senior, 'I know Mercy Travis well. She is the daughter of the dearest friend I ever had.'

Young Molton looked up at his father in silent wonder, for his speech was altogether gone.

'He died young and penniless,' the other said, shaking his head slowly in melancholy remembrance, 'and he put that girl, then a little baby, into my arms and asked me to watch over her. From, I suppose, a delicate fear of imposing her as a charge upon me, he extracted from me a solemn promise that I should see her brought up in a plain way, and able to earn her bread. I was, indeed, only to maintain her in the simplest style, and to give her a calling that would support her in after life. Her father suggested that she should be brought up as a parish schoolmistress, and it is curious that he should have

remarked that, by the time that she was a woman, the profession would have become more remunerative and honourable. By his wish I gave her the name of Mercy Travis. I chose a decent old woman as her nurse, and subsequently as a kind of caretaker. In due time I got her admitted into the school of Uphill, as a pupil teacher, and lately as mistress. A little before this time I contrived to let her know that her birth was gentle, in order that she should keep herself rather apart from those who would be the natural associates of one in her humble station ; and I convinced her that this story was not a fable, by giving her in most particulars the education of a lady. This proceeding involved such a number of curious contradictions and apparent absurdities, that had it not been for the co-operation of my friend the vicar, who was in the secret, the thing could never have been

carried out. But now all is done. In a few months more I myself shall tell the girl her history. I sent you to Uphill, hoping and believing that you would fall in love with her, even before you knew her secret. 'Harry, my dear boy,' cried the father, seizing his son's hand again, 'my very heart's desire has been fulfilled to-day.'

'Am I in a dream?' asked the wondering young man. 'Is there such happiness in the world? It can't—it can't be true. There must be something coming besides light, and joy, and this sudden amazing bliss. Don't mind what I say for awhile. I scarcely know whether I am awake or dreaming.'

He spoke no more, and his father gave him time to recover himself. Strange scenery of life! They were looking down upon the very place where Death and Susan kissed their first passionate kiss, and now it

was the love of the children of that generation which was finding its language and music in the low murmur of the sea—the unchanging sea, which had gone throbbing and tossing up the same shore year after year, while one love ran its course into the darkness, and until another rose to run its course also, and go the way all love has gone since the human heart began to beat.

CHAPTER XVII.

'NO.'

YOUNG Molton had yet two days to spend with his father, and he heard the story of Mercy Travis in all its particulars. He learned too, and with something like a shock, that the name of his charmer, instead of Mercy, would be in time, plain prosaic Susan; and he could not but think the change from Mercy Travis to Susan Bolton decidedly for the worse. At this point, however, he took comfort in the thought that the latter part of the name was not indelible, and he privately resolved to call her Mercy as long as he lived. It may be noted, that it

never occurred to him that Mercy might refuse to marry him. One vivid idea hides another. He had been so occupied with the obstacle which Mercy's supposed lowly birth interposed between her and himself, that, when this was removed, he thought every difficulty had disappeared. He had not a trace of the puppy in his nature, but it never struck him that this beautiful young woman might already have gotten and given affection, and that there might be someone whom she would prefer to himself.

He listened with the interest of a true lover to his father's account of Mercy's childhood and girlhood, and all that he heard increased his affection. His father, by easy arrangements, had contrived to watch over the girl's life pretty closely, and could tell what she had done, and where she had lived, during every year since the death of her

parents. He could tell even the books she had read, or sometimes describe the dresses she had worn, and nothing was minute or unimportant in Harry's fascinated ears. Finally, it was settled between his father and himself that he should propose to Mercy before she was told the secret of her birth, and thus, as even delay was struck out of his path, the eager young man started for his parish with a bounding heart.

The first news he heard upon his return was, that the scarlet fever had broken out in the village, and was running like wildfire through the place. In consequence of this, the schools had been broken up; and in answer to his first breathless inquiry, he was told that Mercy Travis had gone to stay at the house of Miss Crow until the epidemic should have subsided. For Harry Molton this intelligence was mingled bitter

and sweet. He feared that Mercy might not be so accessible in the great house as in her own cottage lodging, but then he was gratified to think that she was in the charge of a lady. Miss Crow was not known to him personally, but he had already heard that she had taken a fancy to Mercy. There were rumours in the parish that Miss Crow was an infidel, and Harry was a very sincere Christian; but, at this particular time, he would have looked even at the old lady's infidelity with a lenient eye, remembering that she was kind to his Mercy; and that she had recognised the delicate qualities of the girl, hidden though these were by her obscure station.

Having considered the matter, he judged that there could be no reason why he should not have an interview with Mercy at the house of her patroness. At first he resolved

to wait for a week before making his proposal, but remembering that delays are dangerous, he fixed the day but one following; and upon more sober reflection, he changed this to the very next morning, which found him, at twelve o'clock, waiting in Miss Crow's small morning room for the appearance of Mercy, who had sent a respectful message that she would be with him immediately.

The door opened soon, but when Harry expected to see Mercy, he was startled by the appearance of a small head-dress moving round into the room a little above the level of the door-handle, and beneath the head-dress the oddest figure he had ever beheld. He, like others, had heard of Miss Crow, but he had never seen her, and could scarcely believe his eyes when the hooped, dwarfish figure advanced towards him. In some

mysterious way the old woman contrived to let him know that he was not welcome; and that she was ready to dislike him upon the slightest provocation. But Harry was in love, and ready to bear many things for his dear one's sake, so he met Miss Crow with an urbanity which might have disarmed most people. Upon her it had no effect.

'Have you come to see my young friend on school business?' she asked, darting a sharp upward look at the curate. He was staggered. Could this old woman, in any way, have got an inkling of his intentions? That seemed clearly impossible, and yet he felt that her glance had a particular meaning in it.

'Not upon school business exactly,' he replied, with some hesitation.

'In that case you cannot see her,' said Miss Crow, in her snapping way.

Molton was taken aback for a moment by this decisive answer, but he collected himself and remembered that through his father he possessed a certain authority over Mercy, and that Miss Crow could have no right to refuse her to him, especially without her knowledge.

'I think it will be necessary for me to see Miss Travis,' he said quietly, 'unless she should be unable to come down just now. In that case, perhaps she will appoint a time when I can call upon her again.'

Miss Crow gave one of her savage looks at him, and finding this ineffectual she was going to speak again, with greater vehemence, when her visitor interrupted her.

'I am afraid I seem pressing,' he said, with a good-natured little laugh. 'Miss Travis has already sent down to say that she can see me.'

Once more Miss Crow was going to speak, when the door opened and Mercy walked into the room.

'Good morning, sir,' said she in her usual way. Miss Crow made a grimace, being evidently displeased at the respectful manner in which her protégée met the curate.

'As I knew you had a headache,' she said, 'I wished to spare you the trouble of a visitor this morning, but he would not take a refusal. I hope, dear, you will not be detained long. Remember, the carriage is ordered in half an hour.'

So saying, and without a glance at young Molton, she passed into the inner drawing-room, and shut the door.

This was by no means a reassuring commencement, and Harry felt as if his proposal must be postponed to some more auspicious hour. Mercy, however, relieved him some-

what from his embarrassment by speaking first.

'Is there any better news this morning?' she inquired, for she thought the visit must be on school business. 'How is the sickness?'

'Worse and worse,' the curate replied. 'It will be weeks before we can have the children back again. How fortunate that you have escaped infection. I hope you have no reason to fear that it is otherwise?' he added. 'Miss Crow mentioned that you had a headache.'

'Oh, that is nothing,' said Mercy gaily. 'I have not caught the fever, sir.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said the curate, and he spoke in such a way that Mercy's cheeks grew crimson. Then their eyes met, and her colour grew deeper still, and Harry

felt that his hour had come. He was too deeply in love to waste time.

'Mercy—Miss Travis—' he said, drawing a little nearer to her, 'I am going to take a great liberty. You are an orphan, I understand, and without any proper guardian, so I hope you will excuse me for speaking to you directly, and without asking for permission.'

And with this modest preamble he began to declare his love. Mercy well knew what was coming, but instinct told her that it would seem more comely in her not to know, until his words had made the matter unmistakable. Accordingly she listened to so much of his declaration as was sufficient to show her that the man whose affections she had won was one of whom, apart from his superior position, she might well be proud. Manly and gentle, fervent and noble, his language went to her heart, and under its

spell she listened longer than, as she felt, it was right for her to listen. But she was held in captivity. At last, startled by some warmer word, and a nearer approach to her side, she sprang back.

'Oh, sir,' she cried, 'Oh, Mr. Molton, say no more! I am doing wrong in listening to you.'

'What do you mean?' asked he, turning very pale.

'I love someone else—I am engaged to someone else,' she answered, desiring to make a full disclosure, and to end all, before he could speak again.

'You love someone else—you are engaged to someone else'—repeated the poor lover. 'Then I am too late.'

That little sentence—for he said nothing more—cut her to the heart, and she felt, as every kind woman feels under similar circum-

stances, a little guilty. To have raised an affection like this, and not to reciprocate it, seemed a crime.

'I am very sorry,' said the tender-hearted Mercy, beginning to cry. 'I know you are so good, but I love somebody else with my whole heart.'

'Why should you excuse yourself?' said Harry Molton, smiling faintly. 'It was my fault—not to know that it would be so. Good-bye.'

He held out his hand, and Mercy casting a glance at him saw how deeply he was moved, and, as she had never received much education in the arts of prudence or prudishness, she did just what her heart bid her, and kissed his hand as he gave it to her. The kiss was full of kindness and pity, but not a kiss to make a lover hopeful.

'I hope you may be very happy,' he said,

as he gently disengaged his hand, 'as happy as I should have tried to make you.'

'I am in love, and I am loved,' replied Mercy, almost glad for the time that she too had a sorrow, 'but happiness is far from me. Something tells me I shall never marry the one I love. I shall live for him, and die thinking of him, but I am afraid that we cannot be husband and wife.'

'Why not?' asked her suitor, who seemed to feel in a curious sort of way that a confidence had been established between them.

'He is a gentleman,' replied Mercy artlessly, 'and you know what I am. His friends will never let him marry a poor girl like me. Sometimes I hope they may do so, but when I think over it quietly by myself, I feel that it will not be. Still I am not miserable, for no one can hinder me from

loving him, and I would rather love him and never see him again, than marry anyone else, no matter how good or kind.'

Young Molton looked at her earnestly, and so long that she wondered what he could be going to say.

'And is that—is your position,' he asked, 'the only bar to your happiness?'

'I know of none beside,' she answered, for her opinion was that her lowly birth alone could make her union with Penruddocke hopeless. 'None at least that may not be got over. But of all bars this is the most immovable.'

'You may be comforted,' he said. 'The bar is an imaginary one, and there is nothing to prevent you from marrying the man you love. You are a lady born, as well as made.'

'What do you mean?' cried Mercy.

'I know the secret of your birth,' he con-

tinued, and amidst all the flutter of her spirits she noticed the fixed sadness with which he spoke. 'You are to know it before long. Meanwhile do not lose your lover for any such reason. If he is a gentleman, you are as good as he. Let him only wait a little, and he will find that his family need not blush for you on the score of birth.'

'How do you know this?' asked Mercy breathlessly. 'Are you sure of it?'

'I am sure of it,' he replied, 'and you will one day learn, without my telling you, how it came to my knowledge. Act on what I have said, and you will not be in the wrong.'

'And you,' said Mercy gently. 'What will you do?'

'I shall always be glad to hear that you are happy,' he answered, in tones like her own. 'Now let me say good-bye again.'

He parted from her with a quiet dignity

that somehow repressed any farther sign of feeling which she in her would-be tenderness might have allowed to escape her, and in a moment he was gone. The whole interview had not lasted ten minutes. Mercy, in the whirl of her thoughts, and the agitation of her spirits, could have wished that the drive, to which she had been looking forward for twelve hours, might be postponed. She wanted to ponder the tidings she had just heard; and, still more, she desired once again to recall the mental and personal merits of Penruddocke, and to assure herself—this time beyond all possibility of doubt—that he was indeed the model of men, and superior even to the suitor who had just left her. But at this moment she heard Miss Crow's voice, and saw her patroness entering the room by the French window, which opened upon the balcony that ran outside the house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONFESSION.

Mercy was not of a suspicious turn of mind, but something in Miss Crow's manner at this moment led her to ask herself whether the old lady might not have been listening to the conversation which had just ended. The window had been lying open, and Miss Crow was very fond of a particular seat on the balcony, which was certainly within earshot of the room, so that against her will, or at least without designing it, she might have played the part of eavesdropper. One thing was clear: her manner was unusually bright and alert, and she seemed greatly pleased, for

she took Mercy's hand into her own, and held it in a petting sort of way.

'So your visitor has gone, my dear,' said she. 'Well, I am very glad, as I want a little air, and you are tired, and ought not to be worried with parish affairs.'

She spoke very kindly, and Mercy tried to answer in her lively, smiling way.

'I shall enjoy a drive,' she said.

But her feelings were over-wrought, and Miss Crow's kind words and caresses quite upset her and she began to cry.

'Don't mind me, ma'am,' she sobbed. 'My headache has come back again, and I am trying to shake it off.'

'Don't try,' replied the old lady, who did not seem at all surprised. 'A cry will do you good;' and she gave Mercy's hand another little pat.

Poor Mercy was not in a condition to

resist these endearments, and she fairly burst out crying, and cast herself on a couch, and buried her face in her hands. Miss Crow said not a word, but Mercy felt a kind hand laid on her shoulder, as if to assure her of sympathy and support. That little touch brought Mercy to a point of resolution towards which she had been moving for several days.

'Oh, ma'am,' she said, 'I have to tell you something which will make you very angry. I must say it at once, or I shall never get it said at all. Your friend, young Mr. Bolton, and I are in love with each other.'

After this confession Mercy buried her face again, and cried more bitterly than ever. Miss Crow meanwhile looked down at her with a very peculiar expression, which had, however, no surprise in it; and when the old lady spoke, the inflection of asto-

nishment which was in her voice was not natural.

'Penruddocke Bolton in love with you!' she exclaimed, and said no more.

'Yes, ma'am,' the weeping girl answered. 'And I have felt for several days that I must tell you all about it. It seemed so mean and wicked of me to keep such a thing secret from you, when you are showing me such kindness. We met nearly a year ago—we could not help it,' added poor Mercy pleadingly, 'and he fell in love with me, and —and—I fell in love with him, ma'am, and then we each found it out.'

'What followed?' inquired Miss Crow in a voice that was still constrained, although Mercy, absorbed with her confession, did not notice it.

'He asked me to marry him.'

'What then?'

'I said I would,' answered Mercy, bursting into a new flood of tears at this admission.

'That was very natural for you,' Miss Crow remarked. 'And what, may I ask, are Penruddocke's intentions now?'

Hereupon Mercy opened up her story more fully. Penruddocke knew by this time, she said, looking straight into the old lady's face, with her frank beautiful eyes, that his aunt, Miss Bolton, had chosen the wife he was to marry. Mercy painted her lover's dilemma in the most artless language, but with an unconscious skill which no rhetorician could have surpassed. Loyalty to his aunt led him in one direction, while loyalty to his sweetheart would draw him the opposite way.

'And I do believe, ma'am,' she cried, with a glow of generous pride on her cheeks,

'that if I was a lady of fortune he would not be so true to me. It is just because I am a poor village girl that he feels in honour bound not to give me up.'

Miss Crow said nothing.

'But I know well,' continued the young girl, with perhaps the remotest expectation that her patroness might contradict her, 'I know well that Miss Bolton will insist on being obeyed.'

'Of that,' replied Miss Crow, snapping her lips together, 'you may be sure.'

'And if Pen is too constant to leave me —too noble,' cried Mercy, rising to her feet, and speaking with kindling eyes, and an energy which made her more beautiful than ever, 'I shall relieve him from the difficulty. He shall never ruin his hopes for me, but one day he shall know how I loved him.'

'What will you do?' asked Miss Crow, with an air of lively curiosity.

'That is my secret, ma'am,' answered Mercy; 'if I told it, even to you, I might spoil all. But I have told you this much, ma'am, because you have been so kind to me, and also because when the time comes you will not blame me. And now, ma'am, don't be angry with me for asking you to promise never to tell Pen that I have spoken to you on this subject. You have great influence with his aunt, and I know you are fond of Pen; do all you can to make her think well of him.'

'And you, my child,' said Miss Crow, asking Mercy the same question which she herself had asked Molton a few minutes before, 'what will you do?'

'I shall remember that I have loved,' said Mercy, clasping her hands, 'and wait for happiness in heaven.'

Miss Crow made a grimace.

'You will have some time to wait, my dear,' she replied. Then her whole manner changed, and she screwed her face up for Mercy to kiss.

'You are a brave girl,' she said, 'a noble girl. Penruddocke might search England over and not find such a wife.'

Here she pulled herself up suddenly, and added—

'But of course I have nothing to say to that. Diana will have her own way, and will insist on Penruddocke obeying her.'

Throughout the conversation the old lady had conducted herself in a way that must certainly have excited the attention of Mercy, had the girl been at all herself; but in addition to her natural agitation, another cause was at work, which detained her observation within the circle of her own feelings.

'I feel so strange and faint, ma'am,' she said, putting her hand to her head. 'I have had this odd kind of shivering feeling several times to-day, and now it has come on worse than ever.'

'You have been exciting yourself,' said the old lady. 'A drive will do you good. There is nothing like fresh air for overwrought nerves.'

'Oh, if you please, ma'am,' said Mercy, taking no notice of this remark, 'I think I had better go home.'

She sank on the sofa, and pressed both hands against her temples.

'Go home!' repeated Miss Crow, 'what makes you think of such a thing?'

'I believe,' Mercy answered, turning her eyes up in a dizzy way, 'I am going to have the fever. I laughed at the idea a little time

ago, but I feel so much worse. Oh, do let me go home. I must not be ill here.'

'Why not?' cried Miss Crow, sitting down beside her. 'Where could you be better looked after? My maid shall help you to your room, my child, and we shall see how you are. In any case, here you stay until we know all about it.'

Mercy tried to take her hand, but at that moment weakness overcame her, and her head dropped upon the old lady's shoulder, and she fainted away.

CHAPTER XIX.

LIKE SOMEBODY.

It was the fever indeed, and of a severe kind. The leading physician of the city, for whom Miss Crow immediately sent, happened to be ill, and his partner came, who was an astonishing young doctor, prodigiously tall, with long lank black hair, deeply-rimmed spectacles, and a medical vocabulary which rushed out with wonderful rapidity and profusion, and which, in respect of the pronunciation of hard words, became at times almost as surprising a feat of articulation as 'Peter Piper.' This son of science made an examination of the patient, and when he had learned that she had been

in contact with scarlet fever cases, at once pronounced the complaint to be scarlet fever, and of a well-marked type.

'Indeed,' he said, with a lively air, 'I have seldom seen a case that was so well-marked before the close of what we call the invasion period.'

'Has the rash come out?' inquired Miss Crow.

'The exanthem,' said the tall doctor, with a severe look, 'is just beginning to show itself.'

'I have a question to ask,' continued Miss Crow, 'not on my own account, but for the sake of my servants: is not the infectious time that when the skin begins to peel off?'

The doctor drew himself up.

'Contagion is most to be apprehended when the epithelial scales begin to pass away,

or we may say in a general way, when the patient begins to desquamate.'

'Desquamation *is* the peeling of the skin, is it not?' inquired Miss Crow, who knew perfectly well.

'It is,' the doctor replied reluctantly.

'I hate all jargon' cried Miss Crow, making an impatient movement and speaking so angrily that the tall doctor thought she must be going to strike him, and hastily shifted his position. 'I like less sound and more sense.' The doctor looked as indignant as a parson who against his will has to listen to heresy. Indeed, he was not to blame, for he generally attended elderly ladies, and had hitherto found that his terminology had been listened to with admiration, and even with reverence. It is a bitter hour for the professors of science, accustomed to despise others, when they learn that they too must bow to the destiny

of all men, and have their nonsense called by its own name.

No sooner had the doctor departed than Miss Crow returned to the bedside of her young charge, who fixed a languid look upon her.

'What is the matter with me?' she asked in a faint voice.

'You have got the scarlet fever, my dear,' replied the old lady, bending over her kindly.

'Am I going to be very ill, ma'am?' asked Mercy.

'You will require care,' said the old lady, 'great care, but all will go well. I shall stay with you, and nurse you myself.'

Mercy was too ill to utter what she felt, but she gave her kind hostess a look that said more than words.

She fell asleep, and from that time for several days she was almost lost to time and

sense. She had, indeed, occasional fits of uneasiness, and sometimes of mental distress, and she suffered from thirst and pain in her throat. But on the whole the hours went by more easily than she could have believed, for in point of fact she slept a great deal, and when she was awake she had fits of wandering. All her life, and especially at any time of weakness, Mercy had been subject to visions in her sleep, or when she was half awake, and these were often incredibly vivid. She inherited the sensibility of brain which troubled her father, and, more or less, all the Bolton family. During the fever these visions were very frequent, and as real as life. But certain snatches of clear consciousness occurred, and during these her observation was vigilant, and her memory retentive, and she saw everything, and remembered everything she saw.

Through stupor and delirium, and even through sleep itself, one thing followed her always, the sense of an ever-watchful person at her side. Scarcely had the sensation of thirst come upon her before a cup would be held to her burning lips. If she wanted to alter her position, or to shift the bed-clothes, it would be done without her asking. When her temples throbbed most a cool hand would be laid on them. For all this she never uttered a word of thanks, but accepted it as the order of things. And she was perpetually conscious that Miss Crow was moving about the room day and night, always busy, always kind, always cheerful, but never asleep, or showing the least symptom of sleepiness.

One night she awoke suddenly in the full possession of her faculties. A noise had awakened her—a noise which she had heard before—somewhere—where?—in the wood

above the village—when ?—on the day she first saw Miss Crow. Lightning goes not so fast as these thoughts ran through her mind. She was broad awake in an instant.

Miss Crow was at the other end of the room, walking to and fro a couple of yards each way, clasping and unclasping her hands, and talking in a low voice but with piercing vehemence. Mercy saw on a table before the old woman the curious shrine-like case with the picture in it, of which she had caught sight in the wood. Then she heard her speak.

'Last night I *did* forget, but I have not forgotten ten times in as many years,' said the old woman, still walking up and down. 'I am quieter to-night, and with you again. Let me tell you all. So much has happened since the night before last. I have felt so strangely excited and uneasy. Why I cannot imagine,

but your face has followed me everywhere of late. It is never out of my sight. There must be some cause for this, and yet I do not understand, I cannot guess, what it is.'

Mercy listened in amazement. At first she felt sure that there must be a third person in the room, for Miss Crow's tone, although full of emotion, was quite rational; but the sick girl soon perceived—and not without a shudder of nameless apprehension—that the old woman was speaking to the picture.

'I understand now,' she continued, stopping in her walk, all of a sudden, and standing before the picture with clasped hands. 'I have caught the face that has been flitting before me so long. It is yours, and yet not yours. It is the face of this girl. Ever since I first saw her something about her has made my blood tingle, without my knowing why. I see all now. I know why I have loved

her. She is like you—the likeness is in her eyes—like you—wonderfully like you. How can that be?'

She resumed her walk, but now in a calmer way, as if she pondered the question she had just asked.

'Is it so wonderful after all?' she continued, after a pause. 'Why, when character is like character, should not face be like face, without any connection, or link of blood? Indeed, I have seen this fifty times myself, that when you find a likeness between the countenances and manners of two people, their dispositions are alike also. This girl resembles you, and so I loved her, without knowing why. She resembles you in character, and therefore she resembles you in face.'

She stopped before the picture again, gazing at it fixedly with clasped hands.

'And so, my loved one—my lost one,' she

said, in a voice trembling with feeling, 'I have found one like you at last. I am childless no more. You are not wholly gone from me, even as a present visible person. I see you living again in this girl.'

She paused once more, and remained silent for a long time, but did not move hand or foot. Then she exclaimed—'But what if she should die, and leave me, as you left me?'

The question seemed to recall her to herself. She turned towards the bed, so swiftly that Mercy had scarcely time to close her eyes before the old woman was bending over her. She felt the breath upon her cheek.

'Sleeping quietly,' murmured Miss Crow. 'And she looks better, I think. Oh, is it I—I whose affections have been so long buried—that am learning at last to love again?'

A silence followed, but Mercy, who dared

not move, felt Miss Crow's breath still playing on her face. Then she heard two sobs, and a tear dropped upon her cheek. After this she felt the tear wiped off with the gentlest of touches, and she heard Miss Crow moving from the bedside.

A little while after she unclosed her eyes. The shrine had disappeared and Miss Crow was sitting at her side, watching her as usual.

'You have had a long sweet sleep, my love,' cried the old lady in a cheery voice. 'See, the day is breaking.

CHAPTER XX.

TWO SUFFERERS.

The fever passed off, and there ensued a period of convalescence which Mercy thought delightful. She had no cares. All her wants were provided for, and that in the most luxurious or tempting way. Miss Crow was ever with her, reading, or chatting, or sitting in the room at her writing-table, but never letting Mercy feel lonely or dull, even for an instant. Whatever this strange old woman might be to others, to the young schoolmistress she was all gentleness and affection; and—for such is the beautifying quality of kindness—her hooped figure and

harsh face began to lose all their ungainliness in Mercy's eyes : deformity became the symbol of suffering patiently and valiantly borne, and the face, so forbidding in its repose, seemed made to express feelings too deep for common natures. Mercy was beginning to love the old woman, and nothing was more remarkable than the delight with which Miss Crow received each new token of affection which the warm-hearted girl exhibited with the freedom of a young and innocent mind, whose emotions are fresh and spontaneous. She would catch the old woman's hand, and fondle it, or press a few kisses upon it, sometimes laughingly and sometimes with tears of gratitude, and Miss Crow would let her hand linger on in its captivity, as if she hoped for a little more love. At times there would be an exchange of spoken endearments :

'You are so kind to me,' Mercy would say, drawing the old woman's dry hand slowly across her own ripe warm lips.

And Miss Crow would reply:

'You dear, dear girl.'

No more would be said, but each would feel that a volume of tenderness had been exchanged. And, fed by these gushes of feeling, there grew up between the two a regard for each other which perhaps neither of them knew or measured, for the lighter passions are egotistical and self-conscious, but deep affection never knows its depth until death or separation discloses it.

Mercy was now sufficiently recovered to walk into the little sitting-room, which was the old lady's favourite resort, when one day they were informed that the vicar had called to see the schoolmistress. Miss Crow, with harshest frown, and showing her teeth like a

watchdog, screamed out to the servant that Miss Travis was not to be seen for another fortnight. But Mercy interposed, and reminded her patroness gently that the vicar was her employer, and had a right to see her; upon which Miss Crow, recognising, as she always did, the claims of duty, ordered him to be shown in. Presently the vicar appeared, and after saluting Miss Crow with much formality, he turned to Mercy with an easier air, and half like a parent and half like a superior, took her hand, and asked her how she was.

'I have called several times during your illness,' he remarked.

'I did not hear of it, sir,' said Mercy, in her artless way, for she never suspected the true cause.

'I thought it better that you should not

be disturbed,' said Miss Crow, and her manner said—by 'intrusive people.'

'Everyone in the parish is indebted to you,' said the clergyman, addressing Miss Crow, and ignoring her rudeness, 'for the care you have taken of our schoolmistress. We could not do without her. She feeds our lambs—though she is rather like a pet lamb herself.'

At this playful compliment, which had however no little feeling in it, Mercy coloured with pleasure, and gave the vicar one of her bright sweet looks, at which Miss Crow frowned again, jealous of anyone who received the smiles she so prized.

'I am afraid,' continued the vicar, 'that I come on a disagreeable errand. You will scarcely care to leave this house, where you have been so kindly watched over by your good friend Miss Crow.'

'She is not going to leave,' cried Miss Crow absolutely.

'I am afraid she must,' replied the vicar. 'I have this morning received a letter from her guardian, who desires me to thank you most cordially for your kindness to Mercy'—the vicar often called the schoolmistress by her Christian name—'and to say that he considers that a visit to the seaside would be desirable for her after her illness.'

'I have made all arrangements for that,' said Miss Crow, contriving to make every word as rough and contemptuous to the vicar as possible. 'The doctor has chosen the place where she is to go, and fixed the time for her departure.'

'I am afraid my reply will seem ungracious,' said the clergyman, who would not be provoked. 'Miss Travis' guardian insists on having her under his own eye.'

'Who is Miss Travis' guardian?' demanded the old lady savagely.

'That,' the vicar answered, 'I am not allowed to tell you. She will learn it for herself in a few weeks' time. This, however, I am bound to say: however good you have been to Mercy, his claims upon her gratitude and obedience exceed yours, just in the same proportion that twenty years exceed twenty weeks.'

Here Mercy interposed:

'Let me go,' she said, looking beseechingly at Miss Crow. 'It can only be for two or three weeks at longest.'

Perhaps Mercy's appeal, or something in the quiet decision of the vicar's manner, availed with Miss Crow, or perhaps she saw some other reason for giving her consent. She turned upon Mercy with an air of cordiality which in all probability was

meant to contrast with her manner to her visitor.

'You shall go, my dear, if you think proper,' she said. 'For one month, remember, not a day more. Then you return to me. It is not to be thought of,' she added, speaking now to the clergyman, 'that she should go on teaching after this illness.'

'On that point,' he replied, 'it is not for me to speak. I have, however, made arrangements by which Miss Travis will be relieved of her work for three or four months, and at the end of that time she will in all probability be able to tell whether she intends to resume her school duties or not.'

'I should be miserable without my school,' cried Mercy. 'You may rely upon it I shall come back, sir.'

The vicar took his leave, and immediately Miss Crow began to discuss the new plan.

It had been arranged, either by the vicar or by Mercy's invisible friend, that the old woman with whom she lived should accompany her to the seaside. She was to go to a small watering place called Riverhead, and when Miss Crow heard this she remarked that under the circumstances she would not accompany her young charge, which at first she had intended to do. But she extracted from Mercy a solemn promise that she would return to her at the end of the month.

This conversation was not quite finished when a servant came in with a letter. The envelope was a foreign one, and Mercy recognised on the cover the large, nervous handwriting of Diana. The old lady opened her letter, which was a very short one, and as her eye ran over its contents she uttered an exclamation of surprise.

'This is news indeed,' she cried.

'Not bad news, I hope?' said Mercy, unable to interpret Miss Crow's tone and look one way or another.

'Diana is coming to England,' said Miss Crow. 'How very surprising! She used to say that the sole of her foot should never again touch English soil.'

'Is she coming on any special business?' asked Mercy, who, however, had her own suspicions on the matter.

'She is coming to see about her nephew's wedding,' replied Miss Crow.

It was just the dreadful answer that Mercy had expected to hear. She said nothing more, and looked out of the window, in the hope that by a superhuman distraction of mind she might keep her thoughts from fixing upon the point where she knew her grief was ready to break out. She did restrain herself for a little while, until Miss

Crow began to move about the room, putting the books in order. Then the fountain of her sorrow broke. Her lip trembled, and one big premonitory tear rolled down her cheek. The old lady, while affecting to be busy, had watched her narrowly, and scarcely had the tear fallen before she was at Mercy's side.

'It is a great sorrow,' she said compassionately, and she took Mercy's hand in her own.

'Oh, it is: it is a great sorrow,' Mercy called out amidst her sobs. And then she laid her head upon the old lady's arm and cried freely. Miss Crow stood at her side, and her face, too, began to work; and at last, as she stood there silently, a tear dropped from her own cheek and fell on her hand. She looked at her hand and then at Mercy, wondering where the tear came from.

'You cannot help this disappointment,' she said to Mercy. 'Nor is Penruddocke to

be blamed. You are young, and the wound will heal.'

'Never, never!' cried Mercy. 'I should be more wretched if it did.'

'The wound will heal,' repeated Miss Crow in her impressive voice; 'and remember, my dear, no one is fit for life who has not suffered, and suffered bitterly. We all need schooling. You are undergoing discipline now, and the stuff of which your character is made will be discovered. Penruddocke is lost to you. Very well. Embrace your sorrow. Wrestle with it. Conquer it. Then you will be fit for life, and fit even for joy. Poor prostrate child,' she continued, stroking Mercy's downcast head, 'let the waves and storms of this great affliction go over you, and while they are doing so, be sure that you collect yourself, and measure the force and the pain of every shock. Don't suffer stupidly, but analyse your suffering while you endure it. Find

out where and why you suffer most. Instead of flying from pain, cast yourself into the hottest part of the furnace ; measure the misery and defy it.'

She let Mercy's hand fall, and turned to walk up and down the room, clasping and unclasping her hands, and at times stretching them out in the air.

'Have I not suffered too?' she cried in tones of terrible intensity. 'Has not anguish poured all its vials of fire upon me? Has not my heart been scorched within me, and my life swept by a devouring flame, which licked up every bright and living thing and left a burning waste behind? Have I not called—have I not sobbed and shrieked for the blackness of darkness to come and swallow me up for ever? Hooped and twisted with disease and wretchedness, an outcast from my country, hated by those I

loved. Oh, have I not known what lonely sorrow is—— ?'

She stopped, and set her lips tightly together:

'And have I not conquered it all? Has time, or what fools call eternity, any terror left me? Not one!'

She came close to Mercy's side, and her face and voice softened all at once, and she played with the young girl's hair, lightly and fondly.

'And after all, have I not found in that blackened, smoking waste one little flower blossoming—a sweet, spotless little flower, fragrant and beautiful, with cool dewdrops on its breast? You dear, dear girl!'

Mercy did not look up.

'Remember what I have said,' exclaimed the old lady with a confident air. 'Face this sorrow; conquer it; and then you will truly begin to live.'

CHAPTER XXI.

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

The elderly woman who had for several years taken charge of Mercy Travis was a retired housekeeper, and in virtue of this office she assumed matrimonial dignities, and although unmarried took the title of Mrs. Trip. She was a small woman, with a white puckered face, which was decorated with two curious bunchy curls of silver hair; she wore spectacles, and had an odd way of peeping, and loved gossip. These were the chief points about her that would attract notice. For the rest, she was a person of excellent character, and talker though she was, never forgot

that she held a confidential position. She knew a great deal about Mercy's secret history, and desperate attempts had been made by several old ladies in Uphill, experienced scandal-mongers, to pick the lock of reserve by means of which she kept her information concealed. These attempts turned out signal failures. Mrs. Trip had one device by which she baffled all inquiry. This was the extremely simple one of never, under any circumstances, telling the truth when she was questioned. She was repeatedly driven to desperation, under the process of inquisition to which she had to submit, but in her most perplexed moments she never forgot her golden rule. Like all persons who act on principle, she had her reward. If one untruth did not answer her purpose, she tried another, and by inflexibly adhering to this policy of falsehood, and

never, even under the most excruciating pressure, deviating into fact, she triumphed at last. Her inquisitors, indeed, unanimously declared that she was a liar! That was not the matter in hand — she kept her secret, and earned her wages.

There was of course much about Mercy's manner of life which was likely to make people curious. Without parents, and discovering a native refinement of manner which neither superiors nor inferiors could fail to notice; holding a menial position and at the same time living almost as a lady; supported in great part—for that much had been ascertained—by an invisible benefactor, and yet toiling for daily bread; it is no wonder that the girl was an object of interest, especially to inquisitive minds. Indeed, some of the worthy ladies of Uphill were quite disordered in their minds about her. Trying to

get facts out of the woman Trip was like trying to draw water from a well in a sieve. The vicar was, in another way, equally hopeless. Three of the old ladies one day held a sort of committee of despair on the subject of the mystery, and as a last resource deputed one of their body to question the vicar pointedly and inexorably on the matter. The deputation was by name Mrs. Dresser, and she was a widow of many years' standing, and of tried sagacity; besides which she was wealthy, and liberal to the church, so that she could venture to go to certain lengths with the parson, who was in a general way feared by his parishioners. The dialogue was short and decisive.

'Do you know *everything* about this young woman?' asked Mrs. Dresser. 'Is she—are you quite sure she is—fitted to deal with the young?'

'I know her whole history,' said the vicar calmly.

'Then,' cried Mrs. Dresser, seizing his hand, with sudden and irrepressible eagerness, 'you must tell me all about it. Come now!'

'She is quite fitted to deal with the young,' said the vicar.

'But who is she?' screamed the deputation. 'What is she? We all want to know.'

'My dear friend,' said the vicar, with an air of benignity which even before he spoke told the deputation that all was lost, 'you are quite right to be anxious about the girl's character and antecedents. These are unexceptionable. As to her family history, I know it from first to last, and I heartily approve of the decision to which the persons interested in her came long ago—that it should be kept strictly secret until the proper time arrives for making it public.'

The deputation retired, and the committee of inquiry was dissolved forthwith.

At different times in her life Mercy had puzzled herself over the mystery of her position, and her wonder and curiosity grew as she increased in years, and in knowledge of the little bit of world she knew. Such curiosity was, however, fitful and intermittent, for she became accustomed to the conditions under which she lived, and her wonder was dulled by use, which dulls everything. But when she found herself settled in a small cottage, on the outskirts of a little seaside village, with nothing except the society of Mrs. Trip to divert her thoughts, and stimulated as she was by her own sorrowful heart, she asked herself the question, 'Who am I?' with an earnestness which she had never felt before. By accident an answer was given to this question.

Mrs. Trip had a nephew, a tall, handsome man, who might have passed for a gentleman anywhere, and who was indeed in the position of railway-station master at a large terminus in the North of England. This man once a year came to visit his aunt, whose name he bore, and this year the visit fell when Trip and her charge were at the seaside. After his departure the following conversation took place :

'Mr. Trip is your own nephew, is he not?' said Mercy.

'Yes,' replied Mrs. Trip proudly. 'And a good nephew to me.'

'But,' continued Mercy, 'I thought you told me you never had a brother.'

'I never had,' answered the housekeeper, who did not see the snare into which she was walking.

'How comes his name to be Trip if he

was your sister's son ?' pursued Mercy innocently.

Poor Trip's face reddened with sudden confusion.

'I forgot myself,' she exclaimed. 'And yet,' she added, after a little thought, 'why should I mind telling you ? My sister and I were servants in Sir Robert Dereham's family, and she was as pretty a girl as was in the county at the time. Young master saw her, and admired her, and they got to walking together in the grounds, and so on, and they began to make love. That went on for a few months and they grew too fond of each other, and she forgot what she had been taught, poor soul ! and felt flattered, and believed all he said to her, as girls will when they are in love. Old Sir Robert found it out at last, and there was a terrible to-do, my Lady crying, and Sir Robert swearing, for he

was a strict father, and always liked to see his servants turn out well. Jane had to leave, of course, and she lost all her spirits, and died of a broken heart before the twelvemonth was out. Her baby was only six months old then, and she wrote a letter to young master, begging him to come and see her, for the love of God. And he came, and she forgave him when he promised to look after the baby. He kept his word. He had the child well brought up, and gave him a good start in life, but he never saw him, as perhaps was as well, and poor Robert does not know to-day that he is a baronet's son. But he knows well enough that all the money that was spent on him when he was young must have come from somewhere, and he is too sharp not to guess the truth. Yes, poor fellow! he knows he was not honestly born; and I think his way of turning red so often, when he is

spoken to suddenly, comes from his knowing that there is a disgrace over him, which people may find out, though what disgrace it can be to the poor children—but the Lord save us! what is the matter? you are as white as a sheet. Miss Mercy—Miss Mercy——'

'I am better now,' said Mercy, as the old woman bustled to her side. 'I felt a little faint—that was all. Let me lie down on the sofa, and leave me for a few minutes. Don't be afraid. Put the bell at my side, and I can ring for you if I want anything.'

A leaden October mist hung over the sea which spread out before the window, grey and sluggish, beneath a gloomy sky. Mercy, resting her cheek upon her hand, lay gazing sadly and vacantly upon the cheerless scene. Little she had imagined, at those times when, with a flutter of heart and a pleasant excite-

ment, she anticipated the disclosure of her birth, what a shock it might be after all. The whole mystery of her life was uncovered now. The story of Robert Trip needed but a change of name to be her own. How simple she had been not to see all this before! Often she had looked at elderly gentlemen and ladies who took her fancy, and in her waking dreams she would dare to hope that perhaps she might one day know a father's and a mother's love, at present for unknown reasons withheld from her. The dreams were ended now; and Mercy, with a bleeding heart, laid her head down under the first sorrow she had known which brought with it shame as well as grief.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BIRD AND THE SNARE.

All that day, and the night which followed, was spent by Mercy in silent and mournful thought, and many a tear ran down her pale cheek. Her sorrow did not lessen, but became more fixed, as she realised her position. Mercy was very proud, and she had settled in her own mind that she was a lady born. She was one of those high-minded women whose spotlessness is delightfully enshrined in a warm, passionate nature. Hers was not the purity of snow, but that of fire. She had love to give—plenty of love—and her fresh, bright, spontaneous piety, and the truth and

honour that shone in every glance, threw an inexpressible charm around her affections. But the very qualities which made her delightful embittered this wound. She felt as if honour were gone, and that such noble love as she once had hoped to win—such love as she would give—could never be hers. She was stricken, and felt that she must hide her head, and live secretly all her days. It never struck her that she might be torturing herself on a rack of her own imagining. She was sure that she had lighted upon the secret of her birth; and indeed all the facts pointed in that direction.

One thing she resolved: Pen must be given up. No matter what he might urge, in the impetuosity of his generous love, she would never let the shadow that lay upon her life fall upon his. Yes, she would give Pen up—and love him, and think of him in

solitude till she died. A pleasing melancholy stole over her as she thought of years of unwavering though unuttered devotion, declining gently into the valley of the shadow of death, and emerging on the farther horizon in a happier world, where, thought poor tearful Mercy, repeating to solace herself the old form of words, '*death and parting are no more.*' To meet Pen there, and in the sweet society of that better land to renew their broken love, and know that it would never be broken again—why, at the very prospect her heart grew lighter.

But a very common-place question intruded itself upon this happy dream. Would not Pen, in all probability, marry someone else? Would he not, as time went on, forget her? And then, what would become of the celestial reunion? Alas! if that were so, her love must wander

on for ever—a love that had lost its way, and could never find it again, but must go on eternally, hungering for food which it never must touch.

Amidst all her pensive and devout resignation, she felt a bitter and resentful pang as she thought of that other unknown woman who would be the wife of Pen.

Many days passed away, and in spite of her dejection she felt her strength returning almost hourly, and she was able to take solitary rambles along the shore. Her thoughts were always with Penruddocke, though she had heard nothing of him for many weeks, and lo! one day, as she was taking her usual walk, she raised her eyes, and there he stood before her. She gave a little scream of delight, and fearing no onlooker upon that lonely November shore, was just going to throw herself into his arms. But

Pen, smiling on her kindly enough, drew back a little :

'I am not quite sure about the infection,' he said.

Mercy, blushing already, grew quite crimson now.

'How selfish of me not to think of that!' she exclaimed. 'However, the doctor says I may go out of quarantine, and that he will give me a clean bill of health whenever I ask for it.'

'I am glad to hear that,' replied Pen. 'Still there is no harm in being careful. I have a great deal to say to you, and while we walk, perhaps you will let me take the windward side.'

He laughed at his own precaution, and Mercy with a swift step made a little waltzing movement to the other side of him, giving him as she flew a little loving look, which she

may have meant as a sample of her new Platonic tenderness.

It might have seemed that Pen, with his fear of infection, was in too cautious a mood for love-making, but as a matter of fact he quite surprised Mercy by the energy and directness with which he pressed his suit. He told her—it was not news, of course—that his aunt was coming to England, and that the arrangements for his marriage were nearly completed, although even now he had not heard the name of his future wife, much less any particulars about her appearance or character. Miss Crow assured him that if he obeyed his aunt implicitly he would be a happy and fortunate man, and Diana in her letters insisted upon his compliance with her wishes, and did so in language of unmistakeable determination.

'Under these circumstances,' cried Pen,

'I am resolved that we shall marry, and take our chance afterwards.'

'But your aunt will disinherit you,' said Mercy.

'I dare say she will,' Pen answered. 'That is, if she finds out our secret.'

'Would you not tell her, then?' asked Mercy.

'That would be courting disaster,' he replied. 'No; let us be secretly married. Once an irrevocable step is taken our course will, by the very pressure of events, become straighter. When we are married, all that will be left for consideration will be the question how we can best avoid my aunt's displeasure. I shall first try to persuade her to let me off the marriage she intends me to make. If she is inexorable, I shall boldly tell her that compliance is impossible, for I am married already.'

'And what then?' inquired Mercy, with eyes that kindled at her lover's bravery and resolution.

'Let her do her worst,' cried Pen.

Mercy would not have been a woman if she had not been affected by this proof of his devotion; and whatever her secret resolutions may have been, she listened to Penruddocke while he unfolded his whole scheme for their future life together. He had arranged everything, even to the method by which she was to disentangle herself from her engagement at Uphill school. As to her secret guardian, and the disclosure which was to come respecting her parentage, Pen treated these very lightly, and would not be persuaded that any authority was likely to arise now who could have a claim upon her obedience. The great point that must be secured at present, Pen declared, was secrecy. If only the fact of

their marriage could be kept out of sight for a time, Miss Diana might be persuaded at least to postpone the execution of her own plan; and in the interval she might die, or the lady might die, or more probably might fall in love with somebody else. In a word, if time were only gained, twenty auspicious things might happen, and everything be well.

'For this reason, darling,' said Pen, in a low, hesitating voice, very different from his late confident tones, 'I want you to consent to one thing. Are you particular about being married in church?'

'What do you mean?' asked Mercy.

'I mean,' answered Pen, turning a little pale, and making three false starts before he fairly got his sentence out, 'might we not be married at a registrar's office? It is much easier to avoid observation in that way.'

'And are people really married at such

places?' asked Mercy, looking up at him with the most confiding simplicity.

'A registrar's marriage,' replied Penruddocke, 'is just as lawful and as binding as a clergyman's. Don't trouble yourself on that score: I shall be yours for ever. What do you think of the idea?'

'I should like to be married in church,' said Mercy. 'But——'

'The chances of safety are ten times greater if you do as I say,' urged Pen, wishing to press her to a decision. He saw that she was half-persuaded already.

'Is a registrar's marriage quite safe?' she asked again. 'I know nothing about it.'

'I assure you,' replied he, speaking now without hesitation, 'an archbishop could not make the ceremony more binding.'

He glanced off from the subject, and began afresh to expatiate on the happiness

that was in store for them. Let the worst come, he could face the life of a poor man when her hand was locked in his. Was she afraid of poverty? he asked.

'But Pen,' said Mercy, 'I have never known wealth like yours.'

'And I have never known beauty like yours!' he cried. 'If I resign money I get love, and surely I win the exchange, as we say at chess.'

What was Mercy, innocent and warm-hearted, that she should contradict him. She could have lived with him in a cottage on sixpence a day, and felt blithe as a lark singing in the sky at sunrise. Why should not Pen find as much in her as she would surely find in him? To a girl like Mercy the reasoning was for the time irrefutable, and appeared as convincing to the judgment as it was seductive to the affections. The

spell of love and of Penruddocke was upon her again. She remembered her vow, that he must never make a sacrifice of such magnitude for her sake; but as he declared his undying devotion to her the sacrifice grew less in her eyes. She was excited, wild with love, thrilling through and through with delight and expectation. They were walking along the loneliest part of the shore. 'Let it be as you say, Pen,' she murmured. 'Oh, how good, how noble, how constant you are.'

'And about the marriage?' he asked. 'Shall I make arrangements at the registrar's?'

'Wherever you please,' cried the enraptured girl. 'I shall do anything you wish. At your side nothing can harm me.'

Recent sickness had left a charming paleness on her cheeks, and now, when these were glowing with modest love, and her eyes

were lighted with the same sacred fire, she looked beautiful beyond herself.

'You will love me, keep me always,' she murmured. 'You will never deceive me. I know it—I know it.'

Penruddocke looked at her, and turned paler than before.

'Let us face the worst at once,' he said, as if full of a new resolution. 'Let us be openly married, and let my aunt disinherit me if she will.'

'But would that be prudent?' said Mercy. In her heart she hated all underhand dealing, but for his sake she was willing to take part in this deception. 'Perhaps things may turn out as you hope.'

Whatever thoughts were running through Pen's mind, these words turned him back again.

'Let it be, then,' he said. 'We shall be married by the registrar.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

MODERN ETHICS.

PENRUDDOCKE BOLTON was not what is called a bad man, but he was setting himself to the accomplishment of a very infamous deception. This may seem paradoxical, and many readers may regard the statement with dislike, or even disgust; but we are concerned with the actual history of human hearts, and not with any ideals, noble or base. This young man, by no means the most infamous of his species, was preparing to entrap Mercy into a mock marriage, and our present business is to show the way by which he was led to meditate a contrivance so detestable.

Detmar, who was one of those hopeless scoundrels whose villainy is not merely habitual but also sophisticated, had a wonderful influence over his former pupil. He would not, indeed, have lifted his finger to save Penruddocke from a ruinous marriage, or from any other misfortune, for he was incapable of friendship in its lowest forms. The active part he took in the present affair was throughout selfish and designing. In money matters, as has been already said, Penruddocke had been liberal to him; and at the present moment he owed his pupil five hundred pounds; and he wished, if possible, to borrow three hundred more before Christmas, for he was hardly pressed, and found the Byronic way of life fearfully costly. Something of this the reader has heard already, but a more full statement of Detmar's difficulties will be needful here, if this painful

passage in our story is to be fairly judged. He had, in fact, received a distinct warning that, if a particular sum of one hundred and fifty pounds were not forthcoming in three or four weeks' time, he would be arrested for debt. The little rake was horribly afraid of this impending calamity. He knew that Penruddocke was his only hope. Others of his acquaintance he had applied to, but they were too like himself to pity him, and they knew him too well to trust his word. His personal applications for loans were thrust aside with empty excuses, and his letters were left unanswered. He sank so low at last, that he wrote to a man whom he had known years before, and whom he had ridiculed a hundred times as a canting hypocrite, asking for the loan of twenty pounds. To his surprise, the money came back by return of post.

'All the saints are fools,' he said to himself with a triumphant sneer, as he drew the notes through his fingers. Then it struck him that, if he were to repay the money, as he promised, in one week, he might establish his credit with this saint, and by this artifice extract a much larger loan. So he put the money in his purse, and resolved not to touch it until the day came when it was to be returned. That very night he fell in with two fellow Byronians, who asked him to join them at the theatre. The amusements of the evening were of the true Byronian sort, and dull care was banished to the music of champagne corks ; but next morning—for those tomorrows have a disagreeable way of turning up—Detmar awoke with a beating head. The headache a dose of brandy and soda-water might have cured, but no power could recall the two ten pound notes which, changed

into sovereigns, had gone flying in all directions the night before. He took heart, however, and without repaying the first loan, wrote audaciously and asked for a second, this time of one hundred pounds. He received a chilly refusal, with a hope annexed that he would at once send back the money already lent.

'Trust your pious man for holding his filthy lucre tight,' said Detmar, as he flung down the letter with a curse.

This sketch of his difficulties will explain to the reader, more fully than our former hints, why he was using every means in his power to prevent Penruddocke from marrying Mercy Travis. He had peculiar difficulties to encounter. Pen was really enamoured of the girl, and might for her sake have cast away his chances in life, for people in love do strange things. But, if Pen were disinherited, Detmar well knew that he must

himself be ruined. On the other hand, so long as Pen had plenty of money, Detmar had little to fear, for to him Pen had been invariably good-natured. To repeat what has been already said, Penruddocke was not a bad man; in fact, he might be described as a man of good inclinations which were unsupported by any fixed principles. The problem which Detmar had to solve was, by what influence a man of this stamp could be induced to commit an act of pure villainy?

To this problem Detmar applied himself with patient and methodical reflection. So painstaking and systematic was he, that he jotted down in his pocket-book such arguments and persuasives as struck him from time to time, and which appeared in his judgment suited to the occasion and to Penruddocke's habit of mind. Not a sneer fell from him, not one sentence of cynicism; he

became quite grave and earnest, and even moralised, following to the full the copy set by his great exemplar, and transforming himself at particular junctures in his discussion into an angel of light. A few of these suggestive hints which he pencilled down to assist his memory will show the insidious and dangerous way by which he gradually overcame the scruples of his friend :—

'If you can accomplish a mock marriage successfully, you need not be apprehensive of any legal consequences. If prosecution were even feasible, the girl would not be likely to resort to it. A substantial money gift must surely avail to purchase her silence concerning a transaction which, if made public, would blast her reputation, however it affected yours.'

'Remember too that, so long as you remain unmarried, you can at any time make

the fullest reparation to the girl by marrying her in earnest.'

This consideration it should be observed —which the wily Detmar pressed upon his dupe again and again—was by far the most influential with Penruddocke of all the reasonings and arguments which were laid before him. But there were others which had a certain wicked reasonableness.

'The ruse'—such was the name given to this abominable deception—'can be easily, safely, and certainly carried out.'

'It is your policy to postpone an open rupture with your aunt for as long a time as possible. Once your enemy, she is your enemy for ever, but every day that catastrophe is delayed, you have another chance of being relieved from all your embarrassments, either by her death, or by some unforeseen accident.'

'You are going to sacrifice a reality—wealth—to an idea—the virtue of a woman. What is virtue? Does it make people happy? How much virtue would it take to make a woman as comfortable as an allowance of two or three hundred a year would make her? Ask yourself that question, and answer it as a man of the world, in a common-sense spirit, and, if you make the girl's happiness safe, will you have any cause for self-reproach?'

From little choice texts of this sort, not by any means conveying at all times the same doctrine, Detmar preached his sermons to Penruddocke; and he had the satisfaction of finding that, by the daily and successive contemplation of the subject, the young man got so far used to it, that his protestations died away, and he no longer expressed any disgust at the ideas which were presented to his mind. Having so far succeeded, Detmar

resolved to make a bold attack. He had long ago seen that his sneers and gibes were out of place, and even damaging to his own schemes; for his final assault he put on the armour of a dispassionate and argumentative air:—

'I want to see your difficulty, Pen, and sympathise with it,' he said. 'Jesting apart now—in all seriousness—what do you consider your duty towards your neighbour?'

'To make him as happy as I reasonably can,' replied Pen smiling.

'And *her* too?' inquired Detmar. 'Does the same rule apply to female neighbours as to male?'

'Of course,' answered Pen, laughing outright.

'And if you could make this girl happy, should you be satisfied that you had not really injured her?' Detmar continued.

'I should,' replied Penruddocke.

'Tell me, then,' the demonstrator continued, 'on what reasonable grounds you could justify the sacrifice of your material prosperity—and the girl's too: remember that—to a squeamish notion about honour and virtue? What principle are you acting on? Only tell me, and I shall for ever after hold my peace, and you shall marry this girl, and live in a cottage amidst a tribe of ragged, squalling brats, undisturbed by me. Come now—your principle—your reason why—let us have it.'

Penruddocke had really none to give. He fell back upon the old language about truth and honour, but when Detmar asked him if, apart from the happiness of human beings, these words had any meaning, he was silent.

'There it is, you see,' cried Detmar triumphantly. 'You have no answer. You could have none. Well, now, just think what

a madman you would be to throw away a whole fortune for the sake of a scruple, of which you cannot give a rational account.'

Chance or fate at this point came to the aid of Detmar in a remarkable way. He fell in with an old school-fellow, who was as great a scoundrel as himself, though not so fortunate. This man, whose name was Clemow, started in life with excellent prospects, for being the son of a solicitor, whose father and grandfather had conducted the same business, he stepped at the age of three and twenty into a splendid partnership. But his habits were low and vicious; he drank and gambled, and might be seen, at all hours of the day and night, hanging about hotel bars and billiard rooms. He got into debt; his father died; the business slipped away; for no client would trust the bloated, blear-eyed sot, who now pretended to manage

the concern. At last his difficulties grew thicker, and under the pressure of affairs he committed some offence for which he was struck off the rolls; and now, a needy and broken man, with delirium tremens hanging over him, he was leading a shameful life in the purlieus of the Strand. Many a time as Detmar was walking past St. Clement Danes the rusty figure slouched out upon him, and would beg half-a-crown for the sake of old times. The little man was not at all given to the Auld Lang Syne view of things on such occasions, and had repeatedly repulsed his old acquaintance with brutal harshness. But now he thought of Clemow as the very man who would carry out his design upon Mercy Travis. The wretch had long ago seared out every trace of conscience with brandy. Danger was a word that for him had very little meaning, for he was most miserable. A

ten pound note—the prospect of a few more hours of frantic debauchery—was enough to buy him for any purpose. Now Detmar, who was exceedingly careful of his own little skin, was not going to mix himself up in the affair of the mock marriage. Here was a tool to work with—a limb of the law, as it happened, who had enough experience of legal forms to carry out such a fraud with an appearance of reality. The chance was too good to be lost, and Detmar, roaring with laughter, detailed to the wretch—who listened with a horrible grin—how the young woman was going to be taken in with a mock marriage, at a mock registrar's, and comforted afterwards, when she found out the trick, by a handsome present. Drink had spread a pretty dense fog over Clemow's brain, but a few sparks of villainy flashed out now, as he made certain suggestions for the more effec-

tual carrying out of the plot, and Detmar perceived that he had made choice of a useful instrument. He feared, however, that Penruddocke would be disgusted if brought face to face with Clemow, whose degradation was not veiled by any relic of better things or times. Accordingly he arranged that Pen should not see the fellow until the time when he was to stand before him in the room where the fraud was to be carried out. Southampton was fixed upon as the scene of the deception, Clemow having an old deaf aunt living in the outskirts of that town, whose house offered peculiar facilities for the execution of such a scheme as that in contemplation. Mercy Travis was innocent, and bound to secrecy, so she would ask no awkward questions of parties other than those who were concerned in the plot. Besides, she trusted Penruddocke absolutely, and would walk into the pitfall without any misgiving.

'Oh, I see it going on now as if I was there,' cried Clemow, rubbing his hands together slowly, and grinning like one who enjoyed evil for its own sake, and irrespective of personal gratification. 'I shall do my part like a good one, I promise you.'

Scoundrel lies in wait for scoundrel. Clemow calculated that he would get Penruddocke into his power; for Detmar had, unguardedly, told him all about Miss Diana Bolton; and the ruffian saw that if this affair were consummated he would be in possession of a secret which would be as good as a small annuity to him. So he entered into the conspiracy with a will.

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